

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

October 31, 2018

Leaf Mulch, Clean Bees, Cutworms

Here is my usual seasonal reminder to collect fallen leaves for garden mulching while they are all around us and to be had for free. Do collect enough to mulch the garden for the winter and also to stockpile for mulching next summer. I store leaves for summer use in bags or covered bins, keeping them dry over the winter to prevent them from decomposing before I need them in June or July. For winter mulching, start putting leaves directly on the garden now as they are collected. Don't shred the leaves first: what we want for winter is a fluffy, coarse mulch that won't break down until spring. Shredded or mowed leaves decompose quickly, which is fine if you want to make leaf mold (pure decomposed leaves) or add leaves to a fall compost pile (but shredding is optional: whole leaves decompose fine, just a bit slower).

Start mulching for winter by working leaves under and between large plants, such as cabbage and winter broccoli, to cover the soil. Push leaves into spaces between leeks, beets and other smaller plants in more densely planted beds. Later on, when the first really cold weather is forecast (usually around early December), pile a deep layer of leaves right over the tops of carrots, beets, celeriac and other root crops to make sure the shoulders of the roots are not damaged by frost. Also make sure the bulb of kohlrabi is covered. I try to start with a fluffy layer of leaves 6 inches thick over root crops and newly planted garlic and also on empty beds. Rain and snow will pack it down over the winter, but you always add more leaves on top if necessary to insulate root crops.

Once leaves are soaked through they stay in place pretty well especially around plants. To hold leaves down on open beds without plants you can lay sections of chicken wire, a network of branches or whatever else you have on hand on top of the mulch. I have pieces of stucco wire that I use for pea trellises and these work quite well when laid flat on leaf-covered beds.

Time to clean your bees: If you have put out nests for blue orchard bees/AKA mason bee, now is a good time to clean the cocoons. This step is necessary to remove mites that infest the nests and kill the bees. There are instructions in two of my books: *2017 Resilient Gardens: Pollinator Gardens, Garlic Diseases, Pest Update* and *West Coast Gardening: Natural Insect, Weed & Disease Control*. Or see Hutchings Bee Service for how to use sand to clean cocoons: <https://sites.google.com/site/hutchingsbeeservice/how-to-clean-bees>. If you can't beg, borrow or find any of these resources, I can email you a pdf clip from my pollinator book if you send me a request directly gilkeson@shaw.ca (DO NOT REPLY to this list address: it will not reach me).

Those darn cutworms: In these relatively warm nights, climbing cutworms have been frolicking and chewing big holes in leafy greens. Most are the caterpillars of the Large Yellow Underwing moth [for photos, see: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers.html#25]. The surest way to deal with them is to go out after dark with a flashlight and look for them on the plants. Their colours range from light green to very dark grey; in the evening they come up to feed along the top edges of leaves and are surprisingly easy to see. Because they are so big it only takes a few cutworms to do a lot of damage, but the good news is that when you catch and destroy the ones that are present now, that's it—there won't be another generation until later next summer.

Last chance to register: If you are interested in taking one of my Year Round Harvest organic gardening courses in 2019, now is the time to register. The courses consists of 10 classes held once a month from January to October. Topics include feeding and preparing soil, year round planting schedules, how to grow a wide variety of vegetables and fruit and deal with the changing climate, storing the harvest, seed saving and managing pests and diseases. For information and to register for the course in Victoria at the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific, see: <http://hcp.ca/year-round-harvest/>
My course on Salt Spring, sponsored by the SS Garden Club, also has a few spaces left. For a class schedule and registration, contact me directly: gilkeson@shaw.ca