

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

January 14, 2019

Pruning, grow lights, SWD, yams

Well, I don't know if there will be a winter this year or not, but other than windstorms, there hasn't been much winter in evidence. As I started to write this, it was sunny and unusually warm outdoors and I suddenly remembered that early warm weather makes trees bloom early....I leaped up and shot out the door to start pruning my trees and grapes.

Pruning: So this is a reminder to get started now on pruning, especially if you have a lot to do. Start with the earliest flowering trees, such as cherries and peaches as they are most likely to burst into bloom soon. Be sure to only prune cherries and peaches on a dry day, frequently sterilizing your pruners as you go to avoid spreading bacterial canker [see: <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/branch.html#155>], which is all too common on these trees in the coastal climate. To sterilize tools, wipe your pruners with rubbing alcohol or soak them in 1 part hydrogen peroxide bleach to 9 parts water and rinse well.

Seeding: The urge to start seeds is irresistible. Up to now I have more or less managed by starting seeds on a heat mat and then running seedlings in and out of the greenhouse daily from the kitchen table, but this year decided to try out a promising grow-light set-up. This consists of a very bright grow light [SunBlaster T5 fluorescent tube] with a built-in reflector. The narrow tube is cool enough to lay directly on a clear plastic dome made for the purpose [SunBlaster Nano Dome] with a groove to hold the light tube above a seed flat. Tubes come in 2, 3 and 4 foot lengths and one tube is supposed to provide enough light for a normal width seedling flat. The one I went for is the single 2-foot tube laid on a dome that covers a standard sized seed tray. It fits a niche on my kitchen counter and is easy to move (handy if you want to trundle it over to a friend's house while you are away...). For larger areas, multiple tubes can be plugged together and several domes can be set side-by-side. The SunBlaster lights also come with clips so they can be hung from overhead or installed under a cabinet; there are also LED lights 'tubes' for the same setup. Available from West Coast Seeds and garden centres: Salt Springers can find these at Foxglove Farm & Garden (Aikens Rd).

SWD again: Another notable result of this mild unwinter-like season is that those #*!#*@#! spotted wing Drosophila (fruit flies that attack all berries, cherries and other soft fruit) are alive and well. I am still catching around 100 flies every day in my vinegar trap on all but the coldest days. If adults make it to spring in these numbers, they will be a problem for the June strawberry crop. In past years, so many SWD were killed by winter cold that early strawberries have not usually been at risk. Generally, it has been taking until mid- to late summer for SWD numbers to build up to damaging levels in gardens where they are present (distribution is still spotty around the region). I didn't catch a single one in my yard until September 10th last fall, but have lots of wild blackberry around so caught huge numbers of SWD all fall. I don't want to wish for a brutal cold spell, but....starting off the season with this many adult flies living through the winter....yikes! So even if you haven't been trapping up until now, if you are growing soft fruit, DO IT! Research shows that more SWD overwinter in wooded areas and around buildings than in open orchards, that it is during mild winters that SWD expands their range to new areas and, as expected, that the more overwintering females survive, the earlier infestations build up in summer.

See my June 14, 2016 message on my Gardening Tips web page for how to make a vinegar trap http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html US gardeners might want to try to find Scentry SWD

lures used by commercial growers—we can't get them yet in Canada--but they do cost more than a homemade vinegar trap.

If we don't get a sub-zero blast of winter cold by the end of February, you might want to consider investing in enough insect netting to cover your berry plants and cherries this year. Several brands are now available in the garden nurseries in the region--ProtekNet, Bug Out, Enviromesh--so ask your local nursery what they have. This is not window screening or bird mesh or curtain netting: it is specifically designed to keep out tiny insects while letting most of the light needed for growth. Foxglove (Salt Spring) has Bug Out, Russell Nursery (Sidney) and Dinter Nursery (Duncan) have been carrying ProtekNet. Insect netting is also sold online.

Sweet potato/yams: If you want to grow sweet potatoes (AKA yams) you can start plants from a grocery store tuber if you start right now. It takes a month or more for the first sprouts to show so you do have to get started this early (with the tuber on bottom heat or in a very warm place) to have plants to set out in May. See my January 22, 2018 message for detailed instructions on how to sprout the tuber. Or you can order slips from Mapple Farms in New Brunswick [<https://www.mapplefarm.com>] which lists 9 varieties for 2019.

And here is another thing to do this time of year: Find a Seedy Saturday near you and attend—they are a lot of fun! Local seed companies will be there along with lots of cheerful gardeners. Most events also feature speakers or gardening workshops. To find one near you, check the Seeds of Diversity list: <https://www.seeds.ca/events> or ask local garden clubs. Seedy Saturdays coming soon in this region: January 26, Galiano Island; Feb. 2, Qualicum Beach and Denman Island; Feb. 9, Salt Spring Island; Feb. 16, Victoria and Mayne Island.