

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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Mulching, Citrus Protection, Planning Ahead

As heavy rains and frequent wind storms continue we are experiencing what is to be expected of a La Niña year. La Niña conditions are forecast to last into the spring so hang onto your hats and brace for colder and wetter conditions than usual this winter. That said, the immediate forecast doesn't show unusually cold weather for the next 10 days, which gives you time to get out and mulch the garden. Reserve some mulch to use when the first serious cold weather arrives to cover completely over the tops of root crops. Last year I wrote up pretty much everything I know about fall mulching so for more details have a look at my November 7, 2019 message: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html ; there is a follow-up message about the (non) risk of spreading pests and diseases on leaves in the Nov. 26, 2019 message.

Another task to prepare for winter: Stockpile some tarps or plastic sheeting to throw over leafy greens and other above-ground vegetables in a cold spell (root crops under a thick mulch won't need additional protection). I keep a pile of tarps folded up in the garage and ready to go, along with a pile of rocks in a corner of the garden to use as weights. Arctic outbreaks are usually accompanied by strong winds so heavy anchors are needed to keep tarps in place. If you have a coldframe or unheated greenhouse, these are great places for the leafy greens that fare the worst in heavy rain and below freezing conditions: lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard. You can still dig up whole plants of chard, lettuce, etc. and move them into an unheated greenhouse or plastic tunnel—or place a wind-resistant tunnel or coldframe over a bed of leafy greens.

If you are growing citrus outdoors and haven't installed winter protection yet, it is past time to do that. Thread pipe heating cables or incandescent Christmas lights through the foliage of each tree to supply enough heat to keep flowers and fruit from freezing. The heating cables have built-in thermostats that automatically turn on a degree or two above freezing. You will need a separate thermostat to control Christmas lights if you want lights to turn on automatically when temperature drops. After installing the heating cable for my lemon tree, I wrap a tube of clear plastic around the my sides and use several layers of floating row cover over the top opening to allow air circulation. In warmer or more protected locations, wrapping citrus with heavy row cover ('fleece') works fine.

Climbing cutworms: These usual suspects are a good size now and can do significant damage to leafy vegetables. Unless you catch them now they will continue to chew ragged holes in leaves of lettuce and leafy greens until April. They hide during the day, but if you go out after dark or even look for them first thing in the morning, you can find them feeding on leaves. They vary in colour from green to brown or even light tan; the ones I found last week ranged in size from 1 to 2 cm long. Catching them now means the end of their damage for the season so it is well worth a couple of patrols right now to get rid of them. By flashlight you will also get a good idea of how many slugs are out and about. If you are using slug bait (safe, iron-based baits) this time

of year, just sprinkle around small amounts whenever it is forecast to stop raining for a day or two so the bait isn't wasted. Given the run on slug bait last spring, you might want to stock up on it for next season if you can find it.

In fact, now is a good time to get organized for the next gardening season in general. Given the run on everything to do with gardening last spring, it would be good idea to get an early start on laying in supplies, seeds and soil amendments. Seed companies are still shipping at this time of year, supplying 2020 seeds or a mix of 2020 and 2021 stock that has come in. Some companies are taking orders after Dec. 1 for January shipment. Don't forget to check out the web sites of local seed companies: with 2021 Seedy Saturday dates in doubt or cancelled, you can still get seeds by mail order from companies you might have counted on seeing at a Seedy Saturday event.

Local garden mentoring groups are starting to gear up for next season, too. On Salt Spring, experienced food gardeners can contact Marian Hargrove momhargrove@yahoo.com to get involved as mentors to new gardeners. Beginning gardeners can also contact her to be paired up with a mentor. With long wait lists for space in our community gardens, Marian is also going to be pairing up people who have extra garden space with people who don't have a place to garden so that more people will be able to grow food in 2021.