

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

January 20, 2022

Pruning, Weeding, Thinking About Starting Seeds

Only last week I woke up to the fact that it IS January and that there ARE gardening tasks to get on with as the days get longer and the new season picks up speed. Snowdrops and other spring bulbs were already emerging and showing buds as the snow receded. February is a tricky month, often with at least one Arctic outbreak, so it is likely we haven't seen the last of cold and snow, but with a spell of dry, mild weather forecast, there are a few things to do outdoors now.

By now you have had a chance to see what plants survived the brutal cold spell in late December. While the summer broccoli that was still producing in my garden before Christmas is now green mush, I was happy to see how well winter broccoli and cauliflower, Brussels sprouts and hardy cabbage came through (some had tarps over them, others did not, but both groups have survived). The oldest leaves of winter broccoli and cauliflower may be dead from cold injury, but as long as new leaves look crisp and alive, the plants will grow more leaves in the spring. They start producing heads from March onward, as long as the roots and stems haven't been damaged. My hardy leeks, Swiss chard, spinach and other greens, which were squashed under tarps and heavy snow, are growing straight now that they have been uncovered. As expected, carrots, celeriac and beets under their thick layer of leaves came through just fine. If you see the tips of garlic shoots poking through the mulch, don't worry—they are extremely hardy.

Pruning: First on my list for this month is to prune fruit trees, bushes and vines. Most of my pruning effort at this time of year is spent on kiwi, grapes, cherry, peach and plum trees. I do most of the pruning on apple and pear trees in the summer (late July/early August), so at this time of year I only have to do touch ups on those trees. Try to finish your pruning by the end of February. It is best to wait until a dry day to prune trees to reduce the risk of spreading diseases so take advantage of the next few days which are forecast to be dry (or at least not wet!). It is important to sanitize your pruning tools, at least between trees. Sanitize pruners in bleach solution (1 part hydrogen peroxide/"eco-bleach" mixed with 9 parts water). Or dip or wipe the pruners with rubbing alcohol. If you are working on trees that have cankers on some branches, try to sanitize your pruners between each cut. This is easier if you have 2 pruners so you can leave one standing in a container of disinfectant while using the other. When cutting out infected branches, try to make the cut at least 10 cm (4 inches) below the diseased area. For photos of common diseases that cause branch cankers, including European canker (apples and pears); black knot (plums and cherries); bacterial canker (cherries and peaches), see:

<http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/branch.html#155>

While pruning this year, watch out for tent caterpillar egg masses on the branches (especially on apple trees) as populations have been building up in the region. They are not easy to see! They look like a small patch (1 cm/½ inch) of slightly shiny, hard, dark grey foam partly wrapped around a small diameter branch (see: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers2.html#30). If the branch isn't slated to be removed, just scrape off the egg masses—they pop off in one piece—and dispose of them. Note: Despite what you might have read 'out there', dormant oil sprays will not control tent caterpillars: the eggs masses are well protected from sprays.

Weeding: Yes, that pesky little winter annual, Hairy Bittercress, is already sprouting and growing well. That's the small mustard family weed with tiny white flowers that snap seeds all over the place [see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardamine_hirsuta]. Pull it right now before it has a chance to set seeds,

which it can do as early as February. The leaves are edible and good in salads. The soil is too wet to be handled or dug up right now, but weeds are easy to pull out. Newly sprouting weeds won't have seeds yet so just drop them on the soil as mulch or into the compost bin. The exception to this is plants that spread by runners (buttercup, morning glory) because they can root again if left lying on the soil. Spreading them out on a gravel or hard surface until they shrivel up, works well: once the plants are for-sure-dead, they can be composted or used as mulch.

Starting sweet potato plants (AKA "yams"): If you want to grow sweet potatoes this year, you can sprout plants from a tuber anytime up to about mid-February. Start with small or medium-sized tubers from the grocery store or from your own crop from last year. One root usually produces 5-10 shoots, but I sprout 2-3 tubers in case one doesn't grow as sometimes happens. There are two main ways to sprout tubers: The 'Kindergarden' method (don't knock it, it works fine!) sprouts the tubers in water. Stick 3 toothpicks around the middle of the tuber so it can be suspended in a jar with of water. Or just prop a tuber upright in a jar half-filled with water (doesn't matter which end is up). The other method is to lay a tuber on its side, half-buried in a tray of moist coir, peat moss or potting soil. The tubers don't need light at this point, but they should be quite warm (I start mine on a seedling heat mat). In a month or so, depending on how warm they have been grown, shoots grow from the tuber. Move the tuber to a warm, sunny windowsill or under grow lights and let shoots grow until clusters of roots form at the base of each shoot. When a shoot has developed a good root system, carefully sever the little plantlet from the mother tuber and pot it up. If shoots are taking a long time to grow roots at the base, just cut the shoots from the mother tuber and put them a glass of water to grow roots, which only takes a week or two. Pot up the rooted plants in good soil, one per pot, and grow them indoors, in good light and warmth until time to plant out in May.

Getting ready to start seeds: If you are not sure whether seeds from previous years are still good, you can do a quick germination test. Fold a few of the seeds into a moist paper towel, put it into a plastic bag or covered container and hold it in a warm place. Check daily to make sure the paper stays moist and to look for tiny white root tips poking out of the seeds. Most seeds germinate enough to see the root tips in 2-4 days. If you have lots of seeds, shake out 20 or so to test germination, but if you don't have many, you can test 5 seeds. Count the number of seeds that germinate out of the total to calculate the proportion of seeds that are still viable. If 75% of seed germinate, that's fine, but if less than half the seeds germinate, sow lots of extra seeds this year and plan on getting (or saving) fresh seeds for future plantings.

I have added a new presentation "How to Grow Your Own Seedlings" to my list of free presentations at <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/presentations.html> I covers ways to provide enough light, temperatures for germination and growth, when to start what veggies, soil mixes and hardening off seedlings so that they are ready to plant outdoors. The presentation also illustrates the germination tests described above as well as how to store seeds correctly to prolong viability.

Don't get too excited yet, though! It is too early to start veggies yet, but it is not too late to get seeds, pots, grow lights, potting mixes. On that note, watch for announcements about local Seedy Saturdays in your community. As happened last year, covid is still wreaking havoc with scheduling and planning these beloved events, but some are going forward virtually or in person. Seeds of Diversity keeps a national calendar of Seedy Saturdays at <https://seeds.ca/events/>. On Salt Spring, plans are for a Seedy Saturday on February 26th...stay tuned for updates from the organizers.