

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

February 20, 2023

Cold Snap Coming, Low Cost Food Gardens

I was hoping we could tiptoe through February unscathed, but it looks like winter is not done yet as we have a brief Arctic blast predicted for later this week. Forecasts show it getting colder Tuesday and Wednesday, with an very cold night Thursday with lows possibly down to -6 degrees C (21 F) around much of the coast. Temperatures that low can be especially damaging for plants that have spent the relatively warm weeks since early January resuming growth and, in some cases, starting to bloom. While garlic shoots are very hardy and should be fine, perennials that have started to grow and now show new shoots could be damaged. Artichokes are particularly vulnerable and can die from a late cold spell after the crowns have started to sprout. SO, cover them up with mulch by Wednesday, and if possible, turn a bucket or large plant pot upside down over the crowns for couple of days of cold. Get out those tarps again and cover beds of lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard. Fluff up the mulch over root crops, radicchio and around other hardy veggies. In the warmest areas, early cherry and peach flowers may be open; they will be damaged if they experience -2 degrees C (28 F). Depending on the size of the tree, there is not a lot that can be done, practically speaking, to prevent frost damage to the blossoms, but small trees can be covered with floating row cover. Trees planted close to buildings where it is usually several degrees warmer than out in the open may escape frost damage. Fortunately, it is still too early in most of the region for fruit flowers to be open.

We had a similar weather pattern last year this time so for more details you might want to read my Feb. 20, 2022 message http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html New subscribers may not know that past messages are archived on my web site and that it can be useful to read messages from the same months of previous years. I don't go into the same level of detail on various subjects every year so you might find useful information in older messages.

What not to do right now: The urge to get out there and do something in the garden is understandable, but I would like to put in a plea for overwintering pollinators, aphid predators, caterpillar parasitic wasps, butterflies and the myriad of other insects we depend on for healthy gardens and functioning ecosystems. Leave the garden cleanup at least until you see bumblebees and hover flies visiting spring flowers. Many bees and beneficial insects are overwintering in old stalks, surface mulches, clumps of dead plant material under hedges and edges. Give them a chance to complete their life cycle: In fact, the longer you delay the cleanup, the better!

Start early plants: What you can do right now is start seeds of vegetables that take the longest to grow into good-sized starts. Celery and celeriac are particularly tiny, slow-growing plants and I plan to start mine this week on bottom heat (after they germinate, they will be moved to a small grow-light setup). I used to start onion and leek seeds in early February, but now wait until first of March to sow those and find that is plenty early for good results. Vegetables started too early just have to live longer in less-than ideal conditions of small pots



and imperfect lighting. For tips on how to start seeds, see the slide presentation on my web site: “Grow Your Own Seedlings” <http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/pdf/Starting%20seeds%202022%20web.pdf>

If you want to grow sweet potatoes (AKA “yams”) now is a good time to sprout a tuber from the grocery store. Sometimes tubers fail to sprout, but it usually works. Lay a tuber on its side, half buried in coir, peat moss or growing mix and keep it on bottom heat to sprout shoots. Another method that works is to set a tuber in a glass of water, using a couple of toothpicks stuck into the sides to suspend the tuber so that half is submerged in the water. Keep plants as warm as possible and when green shoots have grown enough to show little roots, they can each be severed from the mother tuber and planted in their own pots. Someone I know cuts her tubers into large chunks and half buries each chunk in grow mix in a small pot to sprout and grow roots (in this case, don’t remove the new shoots from the main tuber—just plant the whole thing). OR, wait and see if your local garden centre offers plants for sale this spring, which is increasingly common as more people learn that sweet potatoes can grow in our gardens.



Gardening on the cheap: With prices rising, I thought I would compile a quick list of free or cheap materials and tools for growing food. Beginning gardeners, especially, might not realize how well many waste materials and recycled items works to grow vegetables. Some things still have to be purchased as needed, such as complete organic fertilizers, seeds, maybe additional compost, but here are ideas for keeping other costs low:

- Garden beds: To build new beds, don’t buy more soil if there is already soil present; since purchased soil and soil mixes still require amendments to be fertile enough for vegetables, skip the soil cost and invest directly in good compost and complete organic fertilizers to amend existing soil. Don’t buy boards or other materials to build sides for raised beds. Permanent beds and pathways are an excellent way to lay out a garden, but there is no need for beds to be raised in many yards. Where raised beds are warranted (e.g., poorly drained sites), pile soil from pathways onto the growing bed to elevate the soil level (soil in the bed stays in place just fine if you don’t walk on it).
- Garden pathways: Prevent weed growth by laying a layer of newspaper or cardboard on the path; spread leaves or wood chips on top to improve appearance and provide a dry surface to walk on. Renew every few years as needed by just adding another layer of the same on top.
- Organic matter soil amendments: Use composted kitchen waste; make lots of leaf mould compost from fallen leaves or any other materials readily available for free; leave roots of harvested (healthy) plants in the soil to decompose in place; pile on surface mulches, which will raise soil organic matter faster than digging in compost. Excellent mulches: fallen leaves, garden waste and prunings, lawn clippings, weeds pulled or cut before seeds form, any other waste organic matter.
- Lime for acidic soils: Agricultural lime has to be purchased, but is a fairly low cost amendment for acid soil. Get a soil test for pH at a soil testing lab (cost is low and only needs to be done very 4-5 years) and follow recommendations from the lab on using lime. Don’t waste money buying pH kit or probes—they are notoriously inaccurate. Liming acid soil makes nutrients in the soil more available to plants, maximizing the effectiveness of fertilizers and other amendments you

invested in. If you have wood ashes, spread a thin layer on the soil in the spring and mix them in with other amendments to help raise pH and provide potassium and calcium.

- Liquid fertilizer: Soak a shovelful of compost or horse manure (sometimes sold at roadside stands) in a 5-gallon bucket of water for 1-2 days; dilute to a light tan colour and water plants. I could also suggest “P-cycling”, as urine is a wasted resource, but of course I am doing no such thing as that would be frowned on by health departments. Just saying, though, that there are 2 rules for using urine: 1) dilute it 10-15 times with water, and 2) don’t tell 😊.
- Plant supports: Use branches and sticks, scrap lumber, string, recycled stucco wire or fence wire (check the recycling depot); if you know someone with bamboo in their yard, offer to help prune back their plants and carry away the stems.
- Pots: Punch drainage holes in the bottom and use recycled plastic containers or cans; perfectly good pots for seedlings can be made from newspaper (see various YouTube videos for how to make them)
- Seeds: Save your own seeds; trade them with other gardeners (some Seedy Saturday events have seed swaps). If you only need a few plants of a particular vegetable, split a packet with another gardener. Store seeds in very dry, cool and dark conditions—they will stay viable for years longer than seeds kept in poor conditions.
- Cloches: Gallon plastic jugs with the bottom cut off, recycled plastic sheeting, reclaimed glass windows being given away or sold cheaply
- Shade cloth: Lace curtains and tablecloths from thrift shops or garage sales are excellent; deploy them from mid-morning to late afternoon to protect plants from the heat of the day, while allowing early and late sunlight to reach leaves. Weave lightweight panels of willow branches to prop over beds for temporary shade. Cut open compost bags and spread them, white side up, to shade seedbeds germinating in the summer.
- Tools: Buy used at garage sales; put them on a gift wish list so family and friends know what to surprise you with. I find these tools most useful: trowel, garden fork, shovel, leaf rake and a large garden knife (an old kitchen knife or a tool such as a hori hori); pruners if you have fruit trees or bushes. Tools I have had, but never use: hoe, rake, edger. Before investing in specialty tools, see if you can borrow one from another gardener to try it out first.

AT LAST! I have finished updating my big bug book, *West Coast Gardening: Natural Insect, Weed & Disease Control*, and I am happy (and relieved) to let you know that the new, expanded and revised third edition is now out. It covers pests, diseases and weeds for food gardens and landscapes. In this edition, there are 20 new pest and disease entries, more information on damage caused by extreme weather and an expanded section on beneficial insects. To order online:

<http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/books.html> or get it at your local bookstore. Postage costs have become astonishingly high, with a substantial fuel surcharge tacked onto every parcel, so get it at a bookstore (e.g., Munro’s in Victoria; Salt Spring Books on Salt Spring; Volume 1 in Duncan; Laughing Oyster in Courtenay). If you live on Salt Spring, get it at the bookstore or contact me directly to pick up a copy.