

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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Last Harvests, Fall DO List, Late Caterpillars

As the growing season winds down, if you have tomatoes still on the vine outdoors, pick the unblemished ones to continue ripening indoors. Any fruit that has even slightly started to turn from green to slightly yellowish-green will continue to ripen fully off the vine. Days now are so short, cool and wet that nothing much is going to ripen now unless it is in a greenhouse. Peppers that have started to turn from green toward their ripe colour (red, yellow, purple) will also ripen indoors off the plant.



Winter squash and pumpkins still on the vine can stay there until there is risk of frost in your garden. By now they are growing very slowly and if they aren't already nearly mature, they aren't likely to get much further. Keep checking the stems to determine maturity and harvest when the stem has become hard enough that you can't make a mark on it with a fingernail. These late fruit should still be cured after harvest by holding them somewhere as warm as possible for a few weeks.

The last of the main crop potatoes should be dug by the end of this month and, of course, garlic is best planted in October. I was planning to put my garlic where I have been growing pole beans, but the bean plants got such a new lease on life in September that they look like they will keep going for awhile. While planting garlic in October is usually the best timing, early November works too. This not the time of year to spread compost, manure or soluble fertilizers on the soil. With the winter rain it is a waste of nitrogen and other soluble nutrients that leach away over the winter to pollute streams and water bodies. If the soil in your garlic bed isn't very fertile, you could mix compost into the soil before planting as composting does make nitrogen more stable (less leachable). The plants won't be taking up much in the way of nutrients over winter, however, so another approach is to plant the garlic this fall in good soil, but without adding amendments. Then spread compost on the soil between the plants very early next spring (late Feb/early March) to provide nutrients for the crop. Don't forget to mulch the garlic beds after planting.

Just a note to leave asparagus fronds until they turn completely yellow before cutting them down. As long as fronds are green, the plants are still moving nutrients down into their roots so don't cut off that process of prematurely.

Collect leaves this month: The leaves are starting to fall so start collecting them for winter mulch and to stockpile for summer mulch. Leaves are a wonderful, free resource, one of the best mulches you can get, so make the effort over the next month to collect enough. As you bring them home, start spreading mulching between vegetable plants, under fruit trees and bushes. Store a good supply of dry leaves collected on a dry day for use next summer when mulches will be in short supply. The leaves need to be kept dry (in covered bins, big bags, etc.) so that they don't decompose by spring. Keep a supply of leaves for last minute use in November or early December, just before really cold weather strikes. Use these to mulch right over the tops of root crops, leaves and all. We don't want to do this too early in the fall, so for now, just push leaves between carrot, beets, and other plants.

Once it is cold enough that plants aren't growing (and rats are no longer looking for winter nests) you can pile on a very thick layer of leaves, effectively making the bed a living root cellar for the winter.

Caterpillar questions: A last burst of egg-laying in September by the White Cabbage butterflies (often mistakenly called cabbage moths) resulted in a lot of voracious green caterpillars chewing on Brassica plants lately. They especially like the tender young leafy greens we planted a few months ago for winter harvests. The noticeable damage in the last couple of weeks was a reminder of just how much we benefit from yellowjackets, paper wasps, hornets, birds and all the other caterpillar predators that are active during the summer. We don't see them doing the job, but they keep our crops so clean that we don't realize how many caterpillars they eat. At this time of year, when the predators have migrated, died out or gone off to diapause (the insect equivalent of hibernating for winter) our caterpillar protection fails for a few weeks. The butterflies are all gone now, and there won't be more eggs or new caterpillars this fall.

Planning to expand your vegetable garden? Now is great time to start killing turf or weeds by covering the new area with light-excluding covers until spring. This is much, much easier than digging up the area in the spring and far better for the soil because it preserves organic matter. For details, see the December 21, 2023 message: http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html That message is the first in my series, "ABCs of Gardening", which includes information specifically for new gardeners. If that's you, you might want to start reading the ABCs of Gardening section beginning with the December 2023 message and continuing through July.

Plants in greenhouses & tunnels: The lower minimum temperatures experienced in recent winters have done a lot of damage to hardy vegetables so we need to plan for more protection to ensure winter harvests. There are 2 ways to go about it: either cover vegetable beds out in the garden with tunnels, cold frames, tarps or dig up garden plants and move them into beds or planters in a permanent greenhouse or tunnel. In October, I dig some of my garden Swiss chard plants, other leafy greens, lettuce seedlings, parsley, arugula, sweet marjoram and other half-hardy plants and replant them in the bed of my small greenhouse. With care, in cool, cloudy weather, even mature chard plants can be moved

(dig deep enough to keep the long tap root intact, cut back some of the outer leaves to reduce the leaf area until roots get established). I cover beds of spinach and hardy lettuce in the garden with plastic over a frame to protect them for the winter. I also keep a pile of tarps and odd sheets of plastic handy in the garage to cover plants that only need protection if a really cold Arctic outbreak sets in.



Fill the greenhouse with plants from the garden in October.