

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

July 18, 2008

The last week of July and first week of August is good timing for direct seeding hardy greens: arugula, mizuna, collards and the many varieties of kales, leaf mustards, Komatsuna (AKA mustard spinach), spinach (any variety), Chinese cabbages and other Asian greens. If you already have kale and collards planted, those can carry on through the winter. I recommend Komatsuna as a mild flavoured, very hardy and productive 'green'--good fresh in salads and cooked. You can start planting winter lettuce in early August too if you have the space, but that can also wait until later in August.

This is also time to seed winter radishes (daikon, Black Spanish) and winter hardy onions (such as Walla Walla sweets, Japanese bunching varieties, red torpedo varieties). Unlike kales, which are reliable winter crops, onions can be a bit of a risk because heavy snows break them down. Unless protected by plastic tunnels or cold frames, there may be high losses in some winters. Those that do make it produce very early, mild onions.

You might want to cover seedbeds with newspaper or burlap to keep the soil evenly moist until the seeds germinate. Check every day, however, as cabbage family plants sprout in just a couple of days. If it is really hot, seedlings benefit from protection from full sun (e.g., use laths, branches, a piece of light cloth over the apex of hoops or supported on stakes). There is no need for sun protection if we have cooler weather in August, especially once plants have become well established with deeper roots. As soon as plants are a couple of inches high I draw mulch well up around them to keep their roots cool and moist.

To avoid cabbage root maggot damage to winter radishes, cover the beds with floating row covers until late in September. The maggots do the same kind of damage to roots that carrot rust fly does to carrots and their numbers can be quite high in late summer. They attack roots of any cabbage family plants so you may want to cover beds of greens as well--or else plant extras to allow for some losses.

Seed sources:

Salt Spring Natureworks is now selling seeds of many of the plants listed above, including Komatsuna, red mustard, bok choy and pak choy, and other Chinese greens, cress, winter onions and spinach (no lettuces). I called West Coast Seed and they have a pretty good supply of most of their kales, mustards and other winter greens and also winter lettuces. If you order now, you should receive seeds in time to plant. Foxglove has some winter varieties from West Coast Seeds, but didn't have much in stock last week; Salt Spring Seeds is low on stock too.