

# Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

November 5, 2008

As the most active part of the gardening season slows down, there are a couple of jobs left to do for winter:

**Mulching:** When soil is bare during a cold snap, frost expands the surface layers. As the soil moves, it breaks fine roots of plants and can heave the crowns of strawberries, injuring or even killing them. Freezing also damages the 'shoulders' of carrots and other roots exposed above the soil, which causes them to rot. You can insulate the soil with a mulch of leaves, straw or other organic material. Starting in November, I pile leaves at least 6 inches deep around the base of large plants and tuck leaves in between rows of smaller plants. In December I add more mulch to beds of carrots and other roots so that even the foliage is lightly covered.

It is a good idea to mulch empty garden beds as well. Mulches protect soil from erosion by heavy rain, smother weeds and add organic matter to the soil as they decompose. Even a thick layer of leaves is remarkably thinning by spring as soil organisms break it down.

Note: ALL leaves (except walnut leaves, which contain a natural herbicide) make excellent mulch, including oak, arbutus and big leaf maple. You can run a mower over the latter if you want to chop them into smaller pieces, but it really isn't necessary. I find mixing oak or arbutus leaves with softer leaves works well to keep the mulch fluffier.

**Covering:** Some particularly hardy plants, such as corn salad, leeks, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, cauliflower, kale and parsley can withstand most coastal winters without protection. Others, such as lettuce, spinach and Swiss chard fare better with some protection from the worst of the heavy rain and frost. At it's simplest, a cover can just be a sheet of plastic weighed down with rocks. If this isn't supported on a frame of some sort, try to keep water or heavy snow from building up on the plastic for long and crushing the plants. I keep some big pieces of clear plastic in the garage, ready to use as covers in case of an Arctic outbreak. Of course, more elaborate plastic tunnels, cold frames, cloches, or an unheated greenhouse are excellent as covers.

**Brace for wind:** Drive in garden stakes around the stems of top-heavy plants, such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower and cabbage, to prevent wind from breaking the stems. I use 2 or 3 stakes for each big plant. In the worst winters, wind can strip off a lot of leaves, but as long as the stem is intact, don't worry as more leaves will grow from late February onward.

**Harvesting TIP:** You will reap higher yields from a bed of leafy greens if, every time you harvest, you pick 1 or 2 leaves from all of the plants in the bed instead of cutting back a few plants entirely. Because inner leaves are also the hardiest, there is less waste over the season if you keep picking and using the outermost leaves.

You can read all of my previous messages on the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website:  
[www.saltspringenergystrategy.org](http://www.saltspringenergystrategy.org)