

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

May 31, 2009

Thinking of Winter - Believe It or Not

Guess what! It's time to make sure you have seeds on hand for the winter crops that you will be planting during the summer. Last year, seed suppliers ran short of many winter varieties by mid-summer and by July carrot seeds were not to be had on Salt Spring. In addition to your local nurseries, here are two mail order seed suppliers I recommend:

Salt Spring Seeds <http://www.saltspringseeds.com/>

Lots of hardy lettuce and greens, including kales, 'Bietina' (a hardy, smooth leaved chard) and perennial arugula, 'Sylvetta', which overwinters and self sows so you need never be without it.

West Coast Seeds <http://www.westcoastseeds.com/>

A wide selection of winter hardy varieties, including lettuce, greens, several purple sprouting broccoli (early and late) and winter cauliflowers.

Just to give you a taste of things to come, you will need to have seeds for winter broccoli and cauliflower by late June and plenty of seeds for carrots, beets and other roots by July 1st. If you want an idea of upcoming planting dates, check out the archive of messages from last year:

<http://www.saltspringenergystrategy.org/food.htm>

Don't worry, I will still send reminders of upcoming 'planting windows', and as soon as I know who is selling transplants for winter crops I will pass that along as well. For Salt Springers, I do know that Foxglove Nursery is gearing up to grow their own winter crop transplants this year, started at the right time, instead of relying on an off-island supplier was planting too late for our season.

Next week on my winter planting schedule starts Brussels sprouts, that crazy looking vegetable developed over 500 years ago in northern Europe. I seed them the first week of June so plants begin to form sprouts in late September, about when cabbage aphids are dying off and when cool conditions make firmer, better quality sprouts. Aphids distort sprouts and are next to impossible to control when they are feeding inside a developing sprout. Since Brussels sprouts taste best after they have been frosted a few times, late planting works well. For those who have never tasted sprouts fresh from the garden after freezing temperatures have made their flavour nutty and sweet, do try a few (one thing to be said for last winter—the extreme cold certainly produced delicious sprouts!).

All varieties tolerate our usual winter temperatures. Brussels sprouts can be tricky to grow, however, when summer weather is very variable, switching from cool to very hot in a matter of days. I grow both OP and hybrid varieties as I find hybrids (e.g., 'Oliver', 'Vancouver') can be more reliable if we have poor growing conditions. This year West Coast Seeds lists an early OP variety for coastal gardens ('United') that looks promising and a red OP variety ('Red Bull') that looks gorgeous. You can seed in flats for transplants or directly in the garden.

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Avoiding cabbage root maggot damage: Root maggot numbers can be quite high by late summer so for cabbage all family crops, cover seedbeds or flats with floating row covers or window screen before the seeds come up. Keep covered until plants are big enough to have individual barriers slipped around the stem. This can be done at transplant time or when you thin direct sown seedlings to the final spacing. You can make barriers from 6-8 inch squares of heavy paper or tar paper or use several layers of newspaper (one person told me she makes squares from jean cloth and re-uses them). From one edge, cut a slit to the centre of the square, then cut a tiny X at the centre, where the stem will poke through, so that you can get the paper fitting very tightly around the stem (the paper lies flat on the soil surface). Anchor the barrier with a couple of pebbles or mulch to hold it in place. Leave in place for the life of the plant.

For those of you inquiring about buying my books, there is ordering information posted on my web site: www.lindagilkeson.ca

You can read all of my previous messages on the Salt Spring Energy Strategy website: www.saltspringenergystrategy.org