

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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Successful Succession

Once again, I feel like a wet blanket restraining more optimistic gardeners who are all for sowing beans and corn now. People with very warm, protected gardens might get away with it, but the rest of us should consider starting these indoors right now. The minimum soil temperature for bean germination is 15°C (60°F), but 30°C is best. Corn can germinate at a few degrees colder, but also does best at 30°C. Starting seeds now would make them ready to go outside in 2-3 weeks when (surely?) the soil will (might?) be warm enough. You can start beans in vermiculite as for peas (for methods, see my April 1st message at <http://www.saltspringenergystrategy.org/food.htm>). The roots of corn seedlings, however, should be disturbed as little as possible when transplanting. Corn is better off started with each seed in it's own containers: egg cartons with a hole punched in the bottom of each cell, small plastic pots, plastic cell trays, all work well for corn. To warm the soil up faster, lay a sheet of clear plastic on the beds where you intend to put in warm season crops.

Which brings me to succession planting to stretch out the prime harvest period. This means planting small amounts of a crop at one time, followed by planting more of the same at intervals of 2-4 weeks. Most gardeners are familiar with planting successive crops of radishes, lettuce, salad greens and other quick-growing crops. But many of us tend to sow one main planting of the longer maturing crops (cauliflower, corn, potatoes) and crops with a fairly long harvest period (peas, bean). For these crops, however, our relatively long growing season makes a second, third, or even a fourth, planting possible.

Sweet corn: I plant 3 times at 3 week intervals starting with early May (first ones started indoors, later plantings sown directly in the garden). My last planting is in mid-June. I think this works for me because I grow a very early variety (67 days). Mid-season varieties (90-105 days) barely ripen in my garden from the earliest planting so wouldn't work for successive crops.

Peas: Plant another batch of peas a month after the first sowing for a longer pea period.

Bush beans: A later planting in mid-June gives a new crop of tender beans in late summer as earlier plants are coming to an end. I grow 'Musica' pole beans, which usually have another burst of flowering and beaming at the very end of the season so I haven't done successive plantings of these, but it could be worth it to even out the bean harvest.

Cauliflower: I start a few seeds every 3-4 weeks until late July for this season's harvest. (In late June I start the winter varieties of cauliflower).

Potatoes: Since I just grow them to enjoy new potatoes, I am holding off my second planting until the end of May to ensure that I have a late crop of new spuds.

Zucchini? Yes, that's right—this year I am trying out a late planting of zuccs, just to see if the vigour of younger plants gives them more resilience in the fall weather than the ones that have been fruiting all summer.

Check out my web site: www.lindagilkeson.ca

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