

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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Do you know where your mulch is?

[Something to remember for winter vegetables: Mulching is not optional!](#)

Mulching: Even for the hardiest greens, mulches are needed to prevent damage to fine roots from frost heave. When soil is bare during a cold snap, frost expands the surface layers. As the soil moves, it breaks fine roots, injuring or even killing plants. Freezing also damages the 'shoulders' of carrots and other roots exposed above the soil -- and then they rot. So, put the veggies to bed with a mulch of leaves, straw, bracken fern, shredded corn stalks or other organic material. I like to put mulches on in two layers, starting about now with a layer 4-6 inches deep tucked in well around the base of plants. When it gets colder, in December, I put down a second layer of leaves. For beds of carrots and other roots, I also put a light layer of leaves right over the tops of the plants.

While you are at it, mulch empty beds too: This protects the soil from erosion, smothers weeds and adds organic matter. Contrary to what you might have been told, maple, oak and arbutus leaves are all fine to use. I was surprised to learn that even walnut leaves, which contain a natural herbicide, apparently only have an effect on certain plants. If you want, you can run a mower over big leaves to chop them into smaller pieces, but I find it really isn't necessary as even big-leaf maple leaves are pretty well digested in the spring. While you are raking up fall leaves, put away some big plastic bags of leaves or pile them in a bin and cover with plastic so they don't get wet and decompose. Then you can revel in having stored up next summer's mulch!

Staking: The other timely task this month is staking up plants that will be damaged by high winds and heavy snow. Top-heavy plants, such as broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cauliflower and cabbage, should be supported in some fashion. I drive 2 or 3 stakes around each stem. Bamboo or wood stakes or the coated metal stakes used to support flowers all work fine.

Covering: I just sorted my collection of plastic sheets that I keep folded up in the garage in case I need to cover plants in extreme cold snaps. Some plants (corn salad, winter leeks, Brussels sprouts, kale and parsley) don't need covers as they are so hardy. On the other hand, lettuce, spinach and Swiss chard fare better with protection from the worst of 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 sitting too long on the plastic and crushing the plants. The more dedicated gardeners among you may have put up more elaborate covers, such as plastic tunnels, cold frames, cloches--all excellent.

For those of you inquiring about my courses and talks, I have updated my schedule 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.