

Winter Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

September 19, 2009

All things sprouty

Pinch those sprouts: If you are growing Brussels sprouts, now is a good time to pinch the tips out of the plants. By cutting or snapping off just the top cluster of leaves, you force the plant to plump up the existing sprouts, rather than keep on growing more that won't have time to mature. Studies show the optimum time for pinching is when sprouts start to develop in the 7th whorl of leaves (counting from the bottom), but, practically speaking, we are running out of growing season so I do it now no matter where sprouts are forming.

If your sprouts are already reaching full size, they risk becoming over-mature before winter (and you want to wait until they get a good, hard, sweetening frost before harvesting). To slow the growth of such plants, chop some of the roots with a spade or give the whole plant a brisk tug—just enough to break fine roots without dragging the whole plant out of the ground. This also works well to prevent mature cabbages from splitting as they sit out in the garden for the winter.

With the advent of fall rain and gusty wind, it is a good idea to stake up Brussels sprouts and other top heavy cabbage family plants. I drive in 3 or 4 stakes around each plant to support the stems and prevent them from flopping too far in the wind.

Cabbage aphids: Still plaguing broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, etc. are dense colonies of those tiny, light grey cabbage aphids—but their days are numbered as they will soon die off. If you look closely, you will probably see some rigid, pearly, beige coloured aphids among the living grey aphids. The pearly ones have been parasitized by a tiny wasp. Many other aphid predators were abundant a couple of weeks ago, but are now hard to find in all but the warmest gardens. You can blast the aphids off with water or just leave them be. Aphids on lower and outer leaves of any cabbage family plant right now are really not a problem. If they are down inside the heads of cabbage and Brussels sprouts they are more damaging and also much harder to control. Aphids inside sprouts can completely ruin them. If this happened to your sprouts this year, plan to start them later next year. I find that by seeding them late (early to mid-June), the sprouts develop so late that they miss the aphid season entirely. Of course, every fall as I look at my sproutless plants in September and am always sure I planted too late this time—but the sprouts always come along just fine, perfect for December dinners.

A note for you growing sweet potato ('yams'): It is cool enough now that they likely won't grow any more so go ahead and harvest. Cure the good-sized tubers in warm, dry conditions for a couple of weeks, then store in dry cool conditions. Eat up any finger-sized, half-formed tubers right now—they are delicious!

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

When I get a moment I will update my 2009-2010 speaking and gardening course schedule on the web site calendar--but not tonight!

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