

Gardening Newsletter

by Linda Gilkeson

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March Planting, Simplified Crop Rotation

Everyone is eager to plant, despite the occasional waft of winter-like weather (it snowed all yesterday evening at my place). So, what can you do right now? The soil is going to be too wet to work with all the rain this week, but you can try sowing a few things in beds where the soil is reasonably fertile already. Rake off any mulch and remove weeds, then poke pea seeds into the mud or scatter seeds of lettuce, spinach, radishes, cilantro, dill, arugula on the surface. Press seeds lightly into the soil and cover the beds with something (e.g., wire mesh, chickenwire, screening, insect netting, floating row cover) to prevent birds from pecking up the seeds. Scattering safe slug bait (ferric or iron phosphate) is advisable too. Be prepared to sow again if bad weather or slugs or cutworms get the seedlings. Climbing cutworms will be chomping until the end of April; after that they are in the pupa stage, developing into a moth, so are no longer feeding (for what they look like, see:

http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/leaf_chewers.html#25).



Other planting this month:

Rather than risk seeds outdoors right now, I prefer to start my first plantings of peas indoors where they will germinate much faster in the warmth, safe from pests. I just planted the first of many batches of peas for the season (I sow peas every month until July). After germinating on bottom heat, I will grow these peas on a bright windowsill for 2-3 weeks before planting outdoors. Pea seedlings have enough food in their seeds to support growth for several weeks so can be started in any loose medium with or without nutrients: vermiculite, perlite, sand or potting soil. I crowd 25-30 seeds into an 18 cm (6 inch) container so the pots don't take up much room on the windowsill. Meanwhile I also have a few seed potatoes lined up on the windowsill growing sturdy green shoots in the warmth. These will also be planted out after 2-3 weeks. While there is no rush to plant potatoes, it is nice to have really early new potatoes to go with those early peas.



If you are still harvesting overwintered cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, chard, lettuce, spinach and other leafy greens from your garden right now, there is no need to do much else at this time of year. But gardeners without overwintered crops are usually in a hurry by now. You can start seeds of these crops now indoors under grow lights for an early start. Wait until April to start Swiss chard, however, as it is a biennial that is readily vernalized if cool weather occurs after seedlings are planted out. For the full story on vernalization, see "Beware bolting biennial" in my Feb. 20, 2022 message at

http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html

If you have a good setup for growing seedlings under lights or a warm greenhouse you can start tomatoes and peppers now, too, if you haven't already done so. Unless your garden is in a very warm site, wait to start squash, cucumber and melon seeds until early April. These plants grow fast and will be ready to transplant in mid-May, which is usually good timing for much of the region. If the weather is still cool or you live along the foggy, cool coast, plants may have to potted onto larger pots for later planting in early June. If you want to

try for super early zucchini and have a greenhouse or tunnel where they can be grown on, sow a couple of seeds of an early variety (45-50 days to harvest) right now. Zucchini are the most robust of the squash so I usually get away with growing a couple of plants in very large pots in my unheated greenhouse until I can plant them in the garden by the end of April. This can yield harvestable zucchini the first week of May, but it is a lot of fuss to carry along such large plants.

Planning your garden and confused about 'crop rotation'?

There are a lot of misconceptions floating around about this, including complicated systems that don't make sense scientifically. Crop rotation means ensuring there is a gap (usually 4 years) between planting the same kind of plants again in a field or in a garden bed. For example, if you grow garlic, then you wouldn't plant garlic in that place again until 4 years later. Crop rotation in farming is a very different practice than crop rotation as it applies to a home garden. A key reason for rotating crops on a farm is to manage soil fertility by rotating crops that feed the soil, such as legumes, with crops that take up more nutrients, such as potatoes. On a farm scale, crop rotation, often with cover crops included in the rotation, is used to balance soil fertility between crops. In a home garden, this doesn't apply. We grow so many different crops in a small space, often interplanted or in succession in the same season, that it is impractical, if not impossible, to rotate based on nutrient demands of crops. It is unnecessary anyway, as vegetables generally are relatively 'heavy feeders', compared to other kinds of farm crops. On a garden scale, it is easy to apply compost and, if needed, complete organic fertilizer, to the whole garden to ensure sufficient nutrients are available to the next crop without having to worry about what crop was growing there last year.

The most important reason for rotating crops in a garden is disease prevention. This only applies to crops at risk of infection from pathogens that have a dormant stage that survives in the soil between crops. Plant pathogens infect specific host plants so, for example, the various fungi that cause the many root rots in garlic could infect related plants, such as onions, but not unrelated vegetables such as tomatoes, lettuce, corn, squash, bean, cabbage, etc. For most soil-borne pathogens, a rotation of 4 years gives enough time for dormant spores in the soil to die out before a susceptible crop is planted again in that soil. Many garden vegetables in this region have a low risk of soil-borne diseases, but there are a few vegetables that often get root diseases if planted in the same place year after year. This includes the onion family (garlic, onions, leeks, shallots) and potatoes, which are in the nightshade family. Tomatoes and peppers should not follow potatoes for 4 years as they are also in the Nightshade family. The mustard/cabbage (Brassica) family includes so many crops commonly grown in PNW gardens that a 2-year rotation is about all most gardeners can manage, although a longer rotation is a good precaution. For all other vegetables, if they are healthy, don't worry about crop rotation unless they showed signs of a disease that might be soil-borne, such as a root or stem rot or late blight. If that occurs, then don't plant the same or related plants in that soil for a few years.

Short crop rotations of at least a couple of months are necessary if using barriers to prevent root maggots from attacking Brassica plants or carrot family (includes parsnips, dill, parsley, cilantro). Covering seed beds and small plants with insect netting and putting collars around stems of large plants stops adult flies of these pests from laying eggs at the base of plants (from there the maggots bore into roots). [For details on using barriers for cabbage root maggot and carrot rust fly, see last year's message, May 23, 2025 http://www.lindagilkeson.ca/gardening_tips.html]. Barriers only work if all maggots in the soil from a previous crop have had time to pupate and emerge as adults to fly away. Leaving 2 or 3 summer months or 6 winter months between growing related crops is essential if you plan to protect your crop from attack with insect netting. I remember one spring that I didn't pay attention to the fact that volunteer cilantro plants were in a bed I was preparing for carrots. I prepared the seed bed, sowed the carrots, covered the bed with insect netting—and ended up with a total crop loss! There were still maggots in the soil so when adult carrot rust flies emerged under the netting they had a dandy time. After reproducing for 3 or 4 generations, there wasn't much left of that carrot crop...