

Wally's Weekly News 17th October 2009
Written by Wally Richards.

LABOUR WEEKEND PLANTING TIME

A tradition developed many years ago in so much as the right time for planting out in the new season was around the holiday weekend we call Labour Weekend.

Logic says this must be a good time as it is in the middle of spring and about half way to the longest day. Plant growth is determined by firstly the hours of light in a 24 hour period, the soil plus air temperature and the amount of moisture in the soil. The other factors include nutrients for the plant development, the right pH of the soil to allow nutrient up take, even temperatures, even moisture, even space to grow, sunny or shaded, dependant on the plant's preferences and a wide selection of minerals and elements to complete a plant's desired needs.

In some years Labour Weekend is the perfect time for many crops including those that desire a fairly warm growth period, in other years Labour Weekend can be too early or a bit late which all relates to the weather patterns each year.

When the weather warms and stays constant, tomatoes for instance will grow well but if there is a cold snap then they will sit and sulk till conditions improve.

If late frosts, hail and chilling winds happen to be, then losses may occur.

More tender plants such as egg plants, cucumbers, pumpkins, watermelons etc will certainly not do well and often we talk about plantings of these heat loving types a few weeks after Labour Weekend.

Hardy plants such as the brassicas, lettuce, silverbeet and spinach can be planted early and unless they have a major check in their growth they will mature nicely in their own time.

If they have too much of a check in growth then they are very likely to bolt which means, 'go to seed'

This often happens when these vegetables are planted too late in the season for winter produce.

If planted late which means April, May or June they are growing during the shortening daylight hour's cycle and into the cold conditions of winter. What happens is they grow a bit, slow right down during the winter months and when spring comes around they start to grow again and then bolt.

The winter check has caused this to happen, the plant's life has been threatened and all it wants to do is reproduce itself through seeds.

If the same plants were planted in January, February or even early March, they would come close to maturity as winter slows them down and sit in the garden in their maturity over the winter months for you to harvest.

A number of gardeners have complained to me over the last month or so, about their vegetables going to seed before they matured. In each case they planted the vegetables too late, which is the reason the crop failed.

All of these gardeners complained that they purchased the plants from a garden shop so they should have been ok and why were they on sale if it was too late?

Can we blame the garden shops and the nurseries that produced these seedlings?

I don't think so, but maybe a notice of caution should be displayed with the seedlings so that newer gardeners that do not understand the season times are warned.

Some gardeners may have glasshouses or micro-climate areas where these late plantings will do ok and produce mature crops.

It also depends on where you live in New Zealand as to what you plant and when you plant it.

Even the most experienced gardener can be caught out when unseasonable weather patterns occur like we have been experiencing in the early days of this October.

Any plants that are grown for their fruiting aspects will be ok as long as they are not badly damaged by frosts or cold conditions because the bolting aspect does not apply to them.

Foliage and root crops can be affected.

It is very disappointing when we see a young crop go to seed instead of producing mature vegetables.

This is the main reason why it is wise to only plant a small number of plants early and another small number a few weeks later, then again a few weeks later, during the early part of the new season.

If the first or second crop should fail then likely the third crop will be ok and you have not lost all.

If all crops are successful then you have a bonus of mature vegetables to harvest over a good period of time.

In September we had some great weather, sunny, warm and it looked very much like a early season was underway. Gardeners got keen and gardens were planted out, then the weather changed for the worse.

That's gardening for you. There is a bright side to this and that is during those warm days a number of insect pests emerged to start off their new season. It is these early ones that will lay their eggs and produce big populations to infest your gardens. When the early ones are knocked back by a good lengthy cold break as we have experienced, it means that they will not become a problem till much later in the season. With a bit of luck and good management they may suffer a poor season overall which is great for us.

In the meantime we can germinate some seeds and protect these seedlings to plant out when conditions improve and stay improved.

You could also pop down to your local green grocer shop and pick out a few kumara tubers, look for the ones that are showing signs of shooting.

Take a polystyrene box or similar that is about 12cm deep or deeper, make a few holes in the base for drainage and then fill the box half full with a good compost. Press the tubers into the compost to about half their depth with any eyes facing upwards, and then cover with sand or similar.

Place in a sunny warm, sheltered position if you do not have a glasshouse and keep the sand just moist.

The tubers should each produce a number of shoots which you allow to grow till they are about 12cm tall or more. Once you have a good number of tall strong shoots you can carefully lift the tuber and with a sharp knife remove each one, taking a little bit of the tuber and all the roots that the shoot has attached. These then are ready for planting out.

To grow kumara well you need a depth of about 20cm of soft, friable soil that is moderately rich in food. This good layer should be sitting on a very hard pan surface because the kumara will send down roots through the good growing medium and when they strike the hard pan they are halted and thus the new tuber is formed from these roots.

If there is not a hard pan to obstruct the roots they will keep going deeper and never fill out and you end up with a lot of thick roots and no kumara to harvest.

The top layer where the tubers form can be made up of compost, sand, and soil with sheep manure pellets, blood & bone and some BioPhos added. A liquid food can also be applied during their long growing season.

Problems ring me at 0800 466464 (Palmerston North 3570606)