

Wally's Weekly News 28th June 2008
Written by Wally Richards.

THE WINTER SOLSTICE.

On the 21st of June the Northern hemisphere had their summer solstice and we, our winter solstice.

The shortest day means the longest night which also equates to the shortest hours of natural light.

Plants are really affected by short light hours and one of the main reasons that growth is so slow during the middle of winter. If you give plants 24/7 of light and they never stop growing, which is a trick some nursery and glasshouse owners use to get plants moving at this time..

Over the next few weeks your garden plants will start to respond to the increasing amount of light each day. Buds will start to swell as we enter into spring. June is also the beginning of the new year of gardening and the time for you to start for another season.

The first thing to do is to make a list of what you are going to grow this season in annual flowers and vegetables. Seed potatoes won't be far away for instance. (In fact some garden centres have them already)

Once you have your list, then you can visit your local garden centre and pick out the packets of seeds of the plants you wish to grow. The hardy types can be started anytime now, for planting out after they are hardened off. The time frame from obtaining seeds, germinating, pricking out, growing on and then hardening off is about 8 weeks or more. That takes us into August and a nice early start.

Cabbages, lettuce, silverbeet are good early choices to start now.

Being the keen gardeners that many of us are, we use methods to beat the system.

For instance a length of plastic film (grower's plastic) and a number of lengths of No 8 wire can be used to start seeds or seedlings early in spring. You bend the wire to form good sized loops which are placed about every 30cm into the prepared soil. The top of the loop should be about 30 cm above soil level. The distance between, where each end of the loops enter the ground, should be between 30 to 40 cm.

Lay your plastic film along the row of loops and on the prevailing wind side, cover the plastic edge that's laying on the ground (out side of the loops) with soil.

Now along the row, under the loops sow your dwarf beans, carrots or parsnips etc.

Once sown and lightly watered in with **Magic Botanic Liquid (MBL)**, bring the plastic over the hoops and secure to the ground with lengths of old 100x50mm (4 x 2) timber. The ends of this low tunnel house are also secured with wood.

On sunny days there will be a build up of condensation inside the plastic which is not healthy if allowed to happen, day after day. So you remove the wood and fold back the plastic to the earth side of the row, for a couple of hours, on nice sunny days.

The shelter and sun trap the plastic offers, warms the soil and your seeds germinate.

The plastic allows the plants to establish quicker and can be left on till the plant's foliage come near to touching the plastic.

It is important that you do pull back the plastic on sunny days for a few hours. A few days before removing the plastic for good. You need to harden up the plants and a spray of **Vaporgard** is ideal for this.

This method is a cheap way to grow rows of vegetables or flowers quickly, early in the season or sometimes late in the season for some crops.

The above is designed to do in a month or so but you can construct it any time and start to warm the soil under the plastic to later plant seeds. Seedlings obtained from

garden centres now, can be planted under this tunnel of plastic, where they will grow much quicker and give you early crops of vegetables or flowers.

The plastic will give you protection from bird damage but slugs and snails maybe able to get to the plants so spray the seedlings and soil under the plastic with **Liquid Copper**.

A layer about 1cm deep of sawdust around the seedlings and over the ground under the plastic can help. Spray the sawdust with the **Liquid Copper and Raingard** about every 2 weeks.

Birds are hungry at this time and you will likely find that the flowers of your polyanthus are being eaten, especially the blue ones. Place some **Bird Repeller Ribbon** to protect the flowers and else where throw out bread or cheap grain to feed the poor hungry birds.

As I have free ranging chooks in my back yard there are big populations of sparrows and other birds that wait in the trees at 8 am and 4 pm, which are the times the chooks get feed their mash or wheat.

Germinate hardy seeds in punnets on a sunny windowsill in a warm room. As soon as there is a show of germinating leaves place the punnet in the glasshouse or under a plastic tunnel as described above.

When the seedlings are big enough to transplant, prick out into punnets or cell packs (even better) and grow on till they are big enough to place in the garden under another plastic tunnel.

This will give you a great early start.

GREEN MANURE CROPS

There are two alternatives to using green or cover crops, dig in or cut down and cover. Traditionally July is the month when most green manure crops are dug under. But the timing is not critical, as long as there is a reasonable gap between digging under and sowing or planting the subsequent crop.

When a heavy green crop is dug under, bacteria start to work on the foliage and stalks to break down the hard lignin as well as the softer tissues.

To do this they draw nitrogen from the soil, and if seeds have been sown or young plants set out, these may suffer from lack of nitrogen. The products of swift decomposition are also inimical to good growth by healthy roots, so once again living plants in the area can suffer.

The minimum time between digging under and planting out is said to be six weeks in winter, less in warmer summer conditions. But I have dug under a green crop of lupins one weekend and planted a crop of potatoes the following weekend, to gain an excellent harvest.

I think the stricture about leaving plenty of time for decomposition applies more to sowing seeds and setting out very young seedlings.

There is much more leeway when planting hardy crops like potatoes or planting newly arrived rose bushes, for instance.

A soil drench of **Thatch Busta and MBL** after digging in will speed up the breakdown period to half.

To make life easier with tall growing green crops; first cut the crop down near ground level with a weed eater, rotary mower or hedge clippers. Next spray the cut foliage with **Thatch Busta and MBL**.

Now instead of digging in the crop, cover with wet newspaper and over this a layer of compost to hold down the paper. The soil is not disturbed and overall you will have

better results.

Before planting out sprinkle **Ocean Solids and Simalith** over the area and lightly rake into the soil.

These products are mineral rich and will greatly aid the health of your plants and on vegetable crops will place the valuable minerals into your food chain.

Problems ring me at 0800 466464 (Palmerston North 3570606)