

Gardening Articles for week ending 7<sup>th</sup> March 2015

Written by Wally Richards.

## PREPARING FOR AUTUMN

March is the first month of Autumn but according to my plants, autumn conditions started in early February which does not bode well to what the next few months will bring us.

It is an interesting situation this gardening season having a very poor spring then through summer till January. After which summer hit for about a month with some very warm/hot conditions but lacking in strong direct sunlight as a result of many hazy days (likely trapping heat) Then in February it was like a fight between the heat tempered by some fairly chilly winds.

I had a call this week from a reader who has been studying sun spots and the effects they have on global weather. An interesting discussion which would appear that low or no sun spot activity means cold temperatures and a possible mini ice age. Lots of solar activity tends to create the reverse.

The current solar cycle (number 24) ends in 2020 when a the new cycle number 25 begins.

It would appear that we may have peaked with sunspot activity about now and predictions are that there will be less activity heading to no activity around about 2020 which would indicate some chilly times ahead. The whole thing can be very confusing as to what is natural and what maybe influenced by mankind. In my book I think I would rather prefer natural no matter what that means to the possible effects mankind has on the climate or this Geo-engineering thing.

We have had a couple of milder winters but poorer summers its as if the seasons are becoming less distinct; while people in our senior years can relate to hard frosts in winter, for instance, coming out of school at lunchtime to see frost still thick on the ground especially in shaded areas. Yet on the other hand we had lovely long hot summers. (I am referring to Palmerston North area, and realise its not the same everywhere in NZ)

Plants tell us what we cant see or realise. For instance about 40 years ago I could

grow passion fruit vines in the open, in good draining soil and have ample fruit in summer. In winter I would throw sacks over the vines to protect them from frosts. In more recent years I really struggle to grow a passion fruit vine outside without the help of a glasshouse or shelter. I put this down to milder springs and summers.

My phone conversation has lead me to think maybe we could be heading for some cold times.

No matter what the weather makers throw at us one thing is for certain the day light hours are decreasing and that is one factor that plants really relate to.

March is normally the last month to plant up vegetables for harvest later in winter.

Taking advantage of the light hours and warmth still available you can get good growth towards maturity as the light/growing times diminish.

It really is getting a bit late in many areas to start vegetables off by seed so buying seedlings is the best option.

Vegetable seedlings of foliage plants (brassicas, lettuce etc) need to be young plants in their punnets, not large plants which likely have been stressed already. Stressed plants dont mature, they go to seed.

Often when you plant out seedlings from punnets they collapse initially then slowly pick themselves up and start growing.

You can reduce this stress situation by spraying the seedlings with Vaporgard which reduces loss of moisture from foliage and helps balance out the potential root damage.

Prepare your soil or raised garden/container with a good amount of food such as chicken manure, any animal manures, blood & bone, sheep manure pellets and garden lime.

Good food will stimulate good growth and that is what we want, to take advantage of autumn conditions.

In the planting holes for the seedlings place a little of each of the following, Rok Solid, BioPhos and Neem Granules.

If planting out brassicas check the seedlings before planting and rub off any yellow eggs on the leaves as these are caterpillar eggs.

To keep white butterflies and moths from laying more eggs use the crop cover mesh over hoops so they cant reach the plants.

This will also stop birds and cats from doing damage.

Keep the soil moist by light watering till autumn rains take over. We are now seeing dew in the mornings so that means there is less watering to do overall.

Strawberry plants are running now and that means you have free new plants to use or give away later on.

There is nothing to do other than direct them to areas of clear soil so they can root up.

The time to lift and re-organise your strawberries is about May.

If you are wanting to grow tomatoes through the winter in a glasshouse now is the time to take cuttings of existing plants. The laterals on the plants are ideal for this.

Russian Red and other cool temperature varieties are best as they will produce pollen in the lower temperatures of winter.

Capsicums and hot pepper plants in containers can be moved into your glasshouse or similar to protect them through the winter and continue harvesting them.

Open ground grown plants maybe lifted carefully after spraying with Vaporgard to pot up and keep growing.

Talking about Vaporgard you could start thinking about frost protection of tender plants and spray them soon.

A sprinkling of Fruit and Flower Power around them will also assist in toughening up the plants for winter.

If you want a nice show of winter flowering plants now is the time to get them in.

Unlike vegetable seedlings you can now go for the over grown ones in punnets or colour spots as that is what you want, for them to flower.

Some sheep manure pellets and blood & bone are ideal under the plants along with a little Rok Solid.

Spring bulb time is now with new seasons stocks in the garden centres.

If you are in drought situations or with water restrictions delay planting out till the autumn rains come.

Otherwise the sooner in after the soil temperatures have drop to 10 degrees or lower.

If growing in containers place the pots in a more shaded area getting only early of late sun so the bulbs will not cook.

Later as winter comes on they can then be relocated into full sun areas for flowering in spring.

Place some Rok Solid under each bulb at planting time as you get better flowers.

That was a tip from a daffodil hobbyist than grows competition daffodils.