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Reprint from Volume 22 Number 8

Apr 29, 2010

Goodlife Garden Calendar for May ~ Brian Crumblehulme

Garden work is not labourious but enjoyable, and it gives one time, while working, to appreciate the beauty of growing plants. During such periods of active reflection one is able to think and to meditate.

—ER Jane, 1952, Royal Horticultural Society

Two Issues To Address This Month

Strawbale mulching has once again come back into vogue especially for areas with dry summers such as we have. Edward Falkan, an American horticulturist working in the 1930s, developed the technique for preserving the fragile soil during times of drought. The no-digging method based on the principle of not disturbing the topsoil. Instead straw is layered on the dry ground in the fall when some rain is expected and is left to rot all winter. In spring seeds are scattered over the mulch and a second layer of mulch is then added. After WW2 horticulturists in the UK turned it into a fine art.

Straw mulching works best for fruit trees and bushes. Six to twelve inches of straw should be layered around the tree or bush as far as the drip line in November after pruning. I recommend leaving a few inches of space around the base of the stem to keep it clean. The area should also be dusted with bone meal, lime, and wood ash from the stove. This method will kill grass and most weeds (you will still need to root out thistles and brambles, etc). After a year or two a thick layer of compost will develop under the straw thatch and tree roots will be drawn to the surface which means you must never remove the mulch once it has matured because the roots will be damaged by exposure. I started this two years ago and even during last year's drought my fruit trees were much better for it and required less water. This year I will extend it to the raspberries and currants but not strawberries because, besides conserving water and creating a compost that helps build up the soil, the straw also provides cover for a host of friendly and unfriendly bugs.

One warm spring thirty years ago when I thought I had learned the lore of the Salish Sea I sowed a vegetable garden under what I considered ideal conditions, marked off the rows, mulched with straw and sat back and waited. And waited. And waited.

A month went by and still nothing happened until one day out of frustration I went looking for my seeds. Ever tried to find a lost seed when it's in the ground? I remembered where the peas and beans were interred so I started gently digging with a trowel. Under the warm thatch provided by the straw were legions of slugs, bugs and worms, and a few inches further were the sad rows of seeds I had so gently laid. The beans and peas had germinated and sent up shoots to the surface only to be mowed off by an army of carapaced creatures. Not once but four and five times the valiant seeds had tried to grow. Out of fifty dollars worth of seed the only successes were the tomatoes that the poly-legged intruders didn't like.

Caveat! Spring and summer mulching can do wonders for woody plants and trees that can resist this attack, but soft seedlings are far too vulnerable. (Incidentally, contrary to their name, woodbugs do not eat wood. They will live under damp wood but can only consume soft-stemmed shoots and fungi living in the soil.)

Mulching may work well in a farm or urban garden where a century or two of cultivation and chemicals has eliminated the predators but here on the edge of the forest a million mandibles are quivering with anticipation.

Maybe it's age or early onset senility, I don't know, but I did try one more experiment this year. I mulched my potatoes. This morning in early April I peeked under the straw. There indeed were the wriggling hoards but so too were the potato shoots, slightly battle-scarred to be sure but still resolutely striving to reach sunlight.

Next Issue: Deer

The deer were here first and they make a living from browsing and in the dry times of summer anything you

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This article was published (Apr 29, 2010) in 'Island Tides'. 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing 17,500 print copies throughout the Gulf Islands and the Canadian Strait of Georgia from Victoria to Campbell River to Howe Sound.

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have watered is fair game, and they just love tulips and peas. And given that deer have what biologists call a hard palate, this includes roses and other thorny subjects that can be crunched down as easily as carrots.

However, deer have sensitive noses and a strong smell will turn them off. Classically this means Mediterranean herbs such as lavender, rosemary, sage, thyme and so on. Since these plants are also drought resistant they are very popular with landscape designers.

Along the same lines some people claim that peeing on fruit trees will deter deer and I guess that maybe true if the whole family agree to practice every day. I have found that tying mothballs along the lower branches will protect leaves also. Otherwise its fence time. Rather than enclose all of my garden I have elected to only fence off those areas that really need the protection. The kitchen garden for example.

Six feet of deer fencing or stucco wire attached to iron tee-bars is usually plenty and it will last thirty years. Deer rarely leap over high fences but the does and fawns will gladly crawl through a gap in a fence or under a gate. I have seen fully grown does scramble under a six-inch-high gate rather than jump a four foot fence. Do not use old seine nets or loose plastic stuff because bucks will get their antlers caught in the stuff and then starve to death.

Here on Mayne we have the additional question of feral fallow deer. These animals are larger, more aggressive and dine like goats. They will stand on their hind legs like kangaroos and reach seven feet into a tree to pull down branches. Lacking a pack of hounds a strong fence is the only resort.

Still on the subject of pests. Raccoons can clean out a ripe fruit tree in one night, but since they cannot jump they can be kept out by three to four feet of metal flashing wrapped around the tree trunk high enough that the critters cannot get a hold.

On a more cheerful note: when you are prowling around the seed stacks in search of summer veggies and flowers remember to stock-up on winter vegetable seeds now as they may not be available when you need them. Root vegetables, carrots, parsnips, etc, need to be sown in May and June, while winter broccoli and cauliflower should be started in July. And this is also the time to sow winter flowers such as cinerarias, pansies and primulas for a colourful show indoors or out.

And speaking of colour, drought-resistant perennials can be sown now for next year. Some years ago I grew

some red poppies from seed in pots and planted them out behind the fish pond with lots of compost. They require no watering at all and yet every year produce a mass of brilliant red blooms. In August they die down and hibernate for a few weeks. The first rains in September coax up new green shoots that will overwinter until spring when they grow into great green clumps ready to begin again.

Recipes: The Egg, Part 2

Forty-eight-hour-old eggs from free-range weed and kitchen-scrap fed chickens are the best meal in the world. Every cook should keep a flock of chickens. And in addition to a cookbook collection of egg dishes, sauces made from eggs can also turn a humdrum veggie meal into a banquet. At this season there are greens by the bushel: spinach, misuna, carrots, rapini, broccoli, collards, snow peas, fava beans, nettles, chard, what have you. And the sauce to lift any of these vegetables is hollandaise.

Hollandaise Sauce

Prep time 10 minutes

Ingredients: lemon juice, egg yolks, butter

After you have prepared your raw or cooked garden fresh vegetables and placed them on serving plates...

Gently melt the butter in a heavy saucepan, add the yolks and lemon juice and return to a gentle heat (or over hot water) and stir continuously until the sauce begins to thicken. At which point you can spoon it over your vegetables or:

- Add a dash of white wine or stock, or
- Add salt and cayenne (perfect for shrimp), or
- Add cream and pour over a fish fillet or scallops, or
- Add mustard, Tabasco and serve with poached eggs.

Zabaglioni

The Italian version of Hollandaise is Zabaglioni (zabayone). Originally from Sicily this classic sauce is a cuisine all on its own. You need egg yolks, sugar, marsala

As above heat gently and beat the hell out of it as it warms. Pour into glasses when warm and frothy. Or add a dash of lemon juice, cinnamon and vanilla. Cool, then fold into an equal proportion of whipped cream. Serve in glasses or straight from the bowl. You can substitute Grande Marnier for the Marsala. If you want to take it even further, save a cup of Zabaglioni and make Tiramisu.

One restaurant in Verona serves Zabaglioni over fresh steamed asparagus. The only possible wine to complement this would be Prosecco. ☞

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