

Today's column is a tossed salad. In keeping with that theme I'll begin by sharing what I planted on July 4. We finally have a really sunny area in our garden to plant some vegetables. So I sowed seeds of beets, Bright Lights Swiss Chard, radishes, carrots and spinach. All were varieties that like our sometimes cooler summers and won't go to seed too fast in a sunny summer either. The radishes will be ready in 28 days and the beets and the rest of the vegetables take around 60 days. Yum. We can hardly wait. And when I thin the sprouting seedlings I'm going to toss them in a salad for extra taste and texture. My friend Fay Linger told me that's what she does when she thins out her vegetables.

Next topic on today's list is corn gluten meal as a weed controller/eradicator. I went directly to one of our treasured Northwest gardening gurus, Ann Lovejoy, to see what she thinks about this method of weed control. Ann explained that the corn gluten meal forms a thin film on top of the lawn or soil. It can be spread on lawns just like you would spread fertilizer. In flower and vegetable gardens wait until the emerging plants have three sets of real leaves before sprinkling the corn gluten on the soil for weed control.

Next I did some Net surfing. I know I've said it before, but I'll say it again. If you haven't tried searching for information using Google.com you really should try it. I found quite a bit of information so if you want copies of what I found, send a S.A.S.E. to this newspaper marked "corn gluten." Read on for a brief description of what I learned.

In the early 1990s Dr. Nick Christians at Iowa State discovered the herbicidal properties of corn gluten. In addition to suppressing certain varieties of weeds the corn gluten also provides a ready source of nitrogen to nourish plants. Corn gluten is being used as an herbicide mostly in vegetable gardens and on lawns. Do not use it on new lawns though. And don't use it on young sprouting vegetables and plants. Using corn gluten meal as an herbicide reduced black nightshade, common lambsquarters, creeping bentgrass, curly dock, purslane and redroot pigweed by 75 percent and the new shoots were decreased by 50 percent. Catchweed bedstraw, dandelion, giant foxtail and smooth crabgrass were reduced by 50 percent and new growth was reduced by 80 percent. Barnyard grass, quackgrass and velvetleaf were the least susceptible with survival reduced by 30 percent. The corn gluten doesn't work as well on the grassy weeds as it does on other types but, in my opinion, it's definitely worth a try.

The best thing about corn gluten meal is that it's an organic method. You might find it sold as: Dynaweed, Safe 'N Simple, Earth Friendly, W.O.W.!, Corn Gluten Meal Herbicide and Propac. It's also sold as Concern-Weed Prevention Plus. Ideally you would apply it in mid-spring and again in mid-August. The nitrogen supplied by the corn gluten is a slow release form that doesn't burn foliage. One web site listed Walt's Organic Fertilizer Company as the Washington State source for corn gluten sold as "Wonderful Weed & Feed." Their phone number is 206-516-4150. Check first at your favorite local nursery, garden center or hardware store.

Our final topic for today's column is pumpkins. It's not too late to plant pumpkins. Most pumpkins take 100-140 days to mature. If we plant them right now they'll be ready by Halloween. According to the Pierce County Cooperative Extension site at pierce.wsu.edu, Washington State has an excellent climate for growing pumpkins. The site says, "Washington has been the top producer of pumpkins for processing." You can visit the Pierce WSU site and find links to several Giant Pumpkin sites. Giant Pumpkins are actually squash. Valley Nursery in Poulsbo on Bond Road hosts the Giant Pumpkin weight off and contest every year. Call or visit them for more details.

Pumpkins need evenly moist soil. They need one-inch of water per week (like our lawns). The blossoms must be pollinated. Plant alyssum and nasturtiums around your pumpkin patch to attract bees and butterflies as pollinators. Once three or four pumpkin fruits are growing successfully you might want to pick off all other new pumpkins so the plant can put energy into making the fruits on the vine really plump and healthy. You'll also want to fertilize your pumpkin. Try liquid fish emulsion fertilizer or manure tea. Fertilize at least once a month. The pumpkin vine's huge leaves act as a natural weed barrier and keep the pumpkin fruit from getting sunburned. Don't panic in the late fall when the vine starts dying. It's then that the stem on the pumpkin becomes woody and the fruit turns color and is ready to harvest.

Send questions or comments to Peg at gardenmentor@yahoo.com or in care of this newspaper.