

AVOID CROSS POLLINATION

Every year at this time, home gardeners have a unique opportunity to help out local farmers. Commercially grown seed crops produced in Skagit County bring about \$7 million a year into our valley. The majority of the cabbage, beet, and spinach seed grown in the U.S. is grown right here in Skagit county.

As population increases, the possibility of cross-pollination of these seed crops with home grown cabbage and spinach plants that have begun to flower increases. The quality of commercially-grown seed is adversely affected by these back yard crops. Pollen can travel on the wind or be transported by insects for amazing distances.

Garden crops in the cole group such as kale, collard, kohlrabi, Brussels sprouts, Chinese kale, broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage and even those ornamental kales and cabbages can cross-pollinate with commercial seed crops if allowed to flower. These garden plants are no longer edible or attractive at this stage and have served their purpose, so there is no reason to keep them. If you have left over plants in your garden now is the time to dispose of them before they bolt and flower. A similar problem exists with another group of Brassica crops: turnips, Chinese greens, bok choy, Chinese cabbage, Chinese mustard and rutabagas. They all can cause undesirable cross-pollinating with commercial seed crops in the same group if allowed to overwinter and go to seed.

Seed producers of this group of crops report that even the growth of wild turnip plants in untended areas is posing a serious problem. They would appreciate our help in eradicating these plants or at least removing the blossom heads before they release their pollen. Beet seed production also is affected by home grown Swiss chard and beets that have produced flowers. An outcrossing problem occurs with spinach later in the season, from mid-May to the end of July. Commercial spinach seed is being cross pollinated by home grown spinach plants which are often of a different variety. Home gardeners are urged not to let their crops go to seed in order to minimize these problems.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.
