



April – June 2012

GARDEN PREPARATION MADE EASY

Excuses, Excuses:

- ***I don't know how:*** We are here to learn by experience. Every year I learn something new. Start small and increase yearly.
- ***Bad soil:*** too much clay, rocks, or sand. If it grows healthy weeds, the soil isn't that bad. If it is that bad, you can grow a lot of different veggies in pots while you are working to improve your soil.
- ***Don't know what to grow:*** Try tomatoes, summer squash, peppers, cucumbers, carrots, radishes, beets, green onions, lettuce, spinach, chard, bush beans, peas, herbs, and pole beans.
- ***Too many weeds:*** Plant in pots until you've got your weeds under control.
- ***It's much easier to buy at the store:*** In time of national emergency, you'll be glad you prepared your soil and learned how to garden. Learn now to develop good gardening skills.
- ***I don't have a yard:*** You can grow many vegetables in pots or containers on your porch or behind a sunny window.

Your soil is worth more than gold!

Having a patch of good soil is a better long-term asset than gold coins in the bank. Although both of them can be used to obtain food, once you have spent the gold, it's gone. But soil, when properly cared for and maintained, will continue to produce food for you, year after year.

Ideally we should work to improve the quality of our soil every year. Even poor land can be built into productive, rich earth over time by adding a variety of types of organic matter. The three most common are autumn leaves, animal manure, and green manure crops. Besides the nutrients they provide, organic matter also does something else very important – it separates the soil particles and helps the soil to absorb water faster, and also helps to keep the moisture in the root zone. About 85% of your plants' roots will be found in the top 6 inches of the soil, so that is where you want to concentrate the organic matter.

Leaves: Great for your garden except the black walnut tree. Those leaves contain a chemical that will stunt or kill other plants. Most people dig them into the garden in the

fall so they have the winter to break them down. If weather doesn't permit you to do that, you can put them in bags and dig them into the soil in the spring.

Animal Manures: They can be an excellent addition to the garden. Not all animal manures are equal. It will depend on what that animal ate and the kind of bedding material used. If the animal was allowed to eat weeds, you will probably have some extra weeds as a result. Avoid fresh manure. Besides being unpleasant to work with, it will attract flies. One more thing – Be sure you are up-to-date with your tetanus shots.

Green Manure crops: They bypass the critters and the smell of their manures. There are a variety of plants that can be grown for the purpose of digging them back into the soil. There are green manures that are best grown in the spring and others that are best suited for the summer or fall, depending on when you want to do it. If you have a patch of garden soil that is not going to be growing anything for 30 days to feed you, you can grow a green manure crop to feed your soil.

The top 4 most popular green manure crops are garden peas in the spring, beans and buckwheat in the summer, and annual ryegrass or a grain such as winter wheat, oats or rye in the fall. You can harvest the peas and beans before turning under the plants. The ideal is to always have something growing in the allotted garden space, planting something else as soon as possible after an area has been harvested. As you rotate different crops in your garden, hopefully you will include a green manure crop in that rotation to feed the soil that is feeding you.

Importance of Crop rotation:

Since different types of plants draw different nutrients from the soil, it is best to rotate where you plant vegetables that are in the same family group. For example, planting

your tomatoes where you had planted your beans last year, etc. A 4-year rotation is the ideal, hopefully including a green manure. If a garden bed will be planted with more than one crop per year, the principles of crop rotation should apply – a bed of early lettuce should be followed by beans or carrots or corn, not more lettuce. (Keep a record of what you plant each year and where)

The Growing Season:

The best way to counter-balance the initial costs of establishing a garden is to **maximize the yield** of your garden. That means you need to be ready to replant the area as soon as something is harvested so the space isn't idle, and to extend your growing time as much as possible on both ends of the season with the protection of a **hoop house**.

A hoop house, sometimes called low tunnels, can be as big as a full-size green house. They are a series of hoops set in the ground. They can be either PVC pipes or metal tubing. To keep out the critters, you use the hoops to support netting or wire fencing of some sort to create a physical barrier. To keep out insect pests, you cover the hoops with a fabric barrier similar to a dryer sheet. These hoops can also be used to support a plastic covering to enable you to start your garden at least six weeks earlier in the spring, and to continue for another six weeks of extra growing time at the end of the season. That adds an extra 3 months of potential growing time. Two layers may be involved, depending on the outside temperature. The first layer is like a heavier version of dryer sheet material that still permits a significant amount of light to penetrate. Over that goes a layer of heavy clear plastic. The fabric layer is like putting on a sweater when it's chilly outside. The plastic layer is like adding a windbreaker. Some gardeners just use the plastic.

Try it, it's fun!