PREPARING YOUR GARDEN FOR SPRING

By March gardeners are anxious to get back into their gardens. Days are longer, the weather starts to warm, and green grass begins emerging. Daffodils typically make their appearance by late March and early flowering shrubs like forsythias start blooming.

One of the first things to do in the lawn and garden is a winter clean-up. Rake the lawn to get rid of dead growth, leaves, twigs and winter debris. This allows light and air to the soil level, encouraging the grass to grow. Remove dead plants from the garden if they were not removed in the fall. If young trees were wrapped for protection from Southwest Injury, now is the time to remove the wrap. Leaving it on can damage the trunk by allowing insects and rain to get inside. As weeds start to grow in the garden remove them while their roots are still shallow and it is easy to pull them. Chickweed and henbit are two of the earliest weeds to emerge in garden and flower beds.

If you haven’t pruned your fruit trees and small fruits such as grapevines and bramble fruits, you still have time. Pruning should be completed in northeast Missouri by late March, earlier in the southern part of the state. Save the grapevine clippings to start new plants. Apply dormant oil spray to fruit trees, magnolias, crabapples and shrubs such as euonymus to control scale insects and other overwintering pests. Apply dormant oil when the buds are swelling but the leaves haven't opened yet. Apply when temperatures are between 40 and 70 degrees F (4-21 degrees C).

Do not be in a hurry to remove winter mulch or cut back perennials such as roses until temperatures are reliably warm. Do you remember the Easter freeze of 2007? Temperatures had been mild and on Easter weekend nighttime temperatures fell into the teens, causing a lot of damage to fruit crops statewide. Strawberry plants uncovered too soon experienced crop loss or were lost due to the freeze. Buds were damaged on fruit trees around the state, greatly reducing fruit yields that year. So, before you uncover strawberry plants or even rose bushes, make sure the temperatures are not going to drop below freezing.

If freeze and thaw cycles over the winter heaved plants out of the ground, replant them when the ground thaws and the temperatures stay above freezing. Resist the urge to start digging in flower beds too early. Soil structure can be damaged. When you pick up a handful of soil, it should fall apart, not stick together like glue. When it's dry enough, start working the beds and add compost or manure in preparation for planting.

If your mower blades need sharpened or your mower or tiller still need a tune-up, get this done right away. If you plan to take the mower or tiller to (Continued on page 2)
a garden center to be worked on, plan on several weeks before getting it back possibly, as most people wait until right up until they need it to have it worked on. Start preparing other tools for planting. If you didn’t already do it, tighten any loose screws, remove rust, and apply oil to the wood handles for protection from the elements. Taking proper care of tools will make them last a long time.

Cool-season vegetables can be planted by late March in northeast Missouri. I plant cool-season crops like spinach, lettuce and cilantro in a raised bed in late February and cover it with a greenhouse structure. By mid to late April the crops are ready for harvest. Unless it is a really long, cold winter, by mid to late March I make another planting of cool-season vegetables including more lettuce and spinach, radishes, Swiss chard, kale, carrots, potatoes, sugar snap peas, broccoli, cabbage and Brussels sprouts. These can be planted in containers, raised beds or directly into the ground. Containers are not the best for peas. Plant them along a cattle panel or trellis in a raised bed or directly in the garden. By late April and through all of May these crops will be ready for harvest.

The most important thing to know about cool-season crops is that they like cool weather. They must be planted while the soil and air temperature is still cool. If you wait until May to plant them, you probably will not have a productive crop.
ORGANIC PRACTICE: SOIL HEALTH

One of the most important practices in organic gardening, whether it is in the home garden or in commercial production, is the management of soil health. Soil health is the basis for good plant growth and good harvest yields. What is a healthy soil? The terms “soil quality” and “soil health” can be found throughout the internet and books. Essentially, the terms are similar and can be used interchangeably. A quality or healthy soil is one that has good soil tilth, sufficient depth for roots, can readily absorb water but has good drainage, can support plant and animal life, microorganisms and soil dwellers, has a small population of plant pathogens and insect pests and is free of toxins that will harm plants.

How do I maintain a quality, healthy soil? First and foremost, do a soil test every 2-3 years! A soil test will give the pH, phosphorus, potassium, calcium and magnesium levels. Add organic amendments to improve the soil through improving water infiltration, soil tilth, increasing drainage, supplying plant nutrients and improving the physical condition of the soil. There are a number of amendments to add to the soil: peat moss, decomposed manure, humus, compost, grass clippings, leaves, etc. In addition to the amendments, during the growing season, take advantage of grass clippings, leaves, vegetable scraps, or any green or brown organic material that may come your way. Start a compost pile that can be added to your garden soil at the end (or beginning) of the gardening year.

Practicing crop rotation between families in the garden or field will help to prevent disease pathogens and insects. It will also help with the nutrient balance during the planting season. Plant a cover crop that can be sown in the garden when it is fallow or in between crops. They cover the soil, prevent erosion, improve soil tilth, aeration and structure. Once sown, most cover crops will need to be incorporated into the soil or mowed to lay on top of the soil when it has reached 6-10 inches tall. Cover crops such as winter wheat or winter rye can be planted once the crops have been removed in fall. Summer cover crops such as buckwheat can be planted once spring crops such as broccoli, lettuce or cabbage have been removed.

Finally, limit your roto-tilling. Tillers can do a lot of damage if used too much. Tilling should be limited to a couple of times each year to incorporate plant residue, amendments or create seed beds. It is important to remember that tillers can be greatly overused and can destroy soil structure in minutes.

THINK LIKE A ROOT! If you were a root, what would you like from an ideal soil? Surely you’d want the soil to provide adequate nutrients and to be porous with good tilth, so that you could easily grow and explore the soil and so that soil could store large quantities of water for you to use when needed. But you’d also like a very biologically active soil, with many beneficial organisms nearby to provide you with nutrients and growth-promoting chemicals, as well as to keep potential disease organism populations as low as possible. You would not want the soil to have any chemicals, such as soluble aluminum or heavy metals that might harm you, therefore, you’d like the pH to be in a proper range for you to grow. You would also not want any subsurface layers that would restrict your growth deep into the soil.

~From Building Soils for Better Crops, Sustainable Soil Management, SARE

Source: Donna Aufdenberg, University of Missouri Extension horticulture specialist, southeast region

FOUR LEAF CLOVER...A SYMBOL OF ST. PATRICK’S DAY

Today, four-leaf clovers are associated with St. Patrick’s Day, but they appear in centuries-old legends as symbols of good luck. It is debated whether the fourth leaflet is caused genetically or environmentally. There are approximately 10,000 three-leaf clovers for every "lucky" four-leaf clover. There are no clover plants that naturally produce four leaves, which is why four-leaf clovers are so rare. The leaves of four-leaf clovers are said to stand for faith, hope, love, and luck. It’s often said that Ireland is home to more four-leaf clovers than any other place, giving meaning to the phrase “the luck of the Irish.” The shamrock refers to the young sprigs of clover or trefoil. It is known as a symbol of Ireland.
GARDENING TIPS FOR MARCH

VEGETABLES ALL MONTH:
- Fertilize the garden as the soil is being prepared for planting. Unless directed otherwise by a soil test, 1-2 pounds of 12-12-12 or an equivalent fertilizer per 100 square feet is usually sufficient.
- Cultivate weeds and remove old, dead stalks of last years’ growth from the asparagus bed before new spears emerge.
- Asparagus and rhubarb roots should be planted as soon as the ground can be worked.
- Plant peas, lettuce, radishes, mustard greens, turnips, Irish potatoes, spinach, and onions (seeds and sets) outdoors.
- Plant beets, carrots, parsley, and parsnip seeds outdoors. Set out broccoli, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, Chinese cabbage, and cauliflower transplants into the garden.
- Start seeds of tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants indoors.

ORNAMENTALS:
- To control Iris borer, clean up and destroy old foliage before new growth begins.
- Fertilize bulbs with a “bulb booster” formulation broadcast over the bed.
- Loosen winter mulches from perennials cautiously.
- Dormant mail order plants should be unwrapped immediately. Keep roots from drying out.
- Trees, shrubs, and perennials may be planted as soon as they become available at local nurseries.
- Seeds of hardy annuals such as larkspur, bachelor’s buttons, Shirley and California poppies should be direct sown in the garden now.
- Heavy pruning of trees should be complete before growth occurs. Trees should not be pruned while the new leaves are growing.
- Summer and fall blooming perennials should be divided in spring.
- Apply sulfur to the soils around acid-loving plants such as Azaleas, Rhododendrons, Hollies, and Dogwoods. Use a granular formulation at the rate of ½ pound per 100 square feet.
- Apply a balanced fertilizer such as 6-12-12 to perennial beds when new growth appears.
- Spring bedding plants such as pansies and toadflax may be planted.
- Ornamental grasses should be cut to the ground as new growth begins.
- Gradually start to pull back mulch from rose bushes.

FRUITS:
- Gradually remove mulch from strawberries as the weather warms.
- Continue pruning grapes. Bleeding causes no injury to the vines.
- Continue pruning apple trees. Burn or destroy all prunings to minimize insect or disease occurrence.
- Apply dormant oil sprays on a dry day when freezing temperatures are not expected.
- Spray peach trees with a fungicide for control of peach leaf curl.
- Peaches and nectarines should be pruned just before they bloom.
- Mulch all bramble fruits for weed control.

LAWN AND TURF:
- Mow lawns low to remove old growth before new growth begins.
- Apply broadleaf herbicides for control of cool-season perennial and annual weeds. Do not apply to areas that will be seeded soon.
- Thin spots and bare patches in the lawn can be over-seeded now.

Source: Missouri Botanical Garden

UPCOMING EVENTS

March 21: Beginning Gardener Workshop, 9-1, Jacob’s Vineyard and Winery, Kirksville, MO. Learn the basics of growing and preserving your own food. No cost to attend, but please RSVP. Call 660-665-9866 or email schutterjl@missouri.edu.

March 25: Lewis County Women In Agriculture Workshop, United Methodist Church, Monticello, MO.

March 27: Spring Gardening Workshop, Brookfield, MO.

April 18: Spring Forward into Gardening, William Matthew Middle School, Kirksville, 9:00-3:30. Registration forms at http://extension.missouri.edu/adair or call 660-665-9866.

August 2015: Master Gardener training in Kirksville; Wednesdays, 1:30-4:30 pm. If interested contact me. We must have 10 to have a class. Master Gardener training is also offered online each semester. If you are not able to take MG training face-to-face or live in a county too far from the training site, consider taking the online training and doing it at your own pace. The next class will be offered in the fall. Sign up on the state Master Gardener homepage at http://mg.missouri.edu/.

September 11-13: State Master Gardener Conference, Columbia, MO.