

GARDEN HINTS FOR SPRING PLANNING AND PLANTING

As you are gearing up for another season and planning your plots, here are a few suggestions and cautions. If you are a new gardener, hope these hints get you off to a good start. For those of you who are experienced gardeners, perhaps there will be something new for you, too.

1. DON'T WORK IN YOUR PLOT IF THE SOIL IS TOO WET

Walking on wet soil where you plan to plant compacts the soil and presses out the air spaces that the roots will need to thrive. Even turning the soil over when it's wet will leave clumps of soil that will dry into hard lumps that are almost impossible to break up later on. Test the soil in your own plot to see if it's dry enough to either walk on or work in. To test, get a handful of soil somewhat below the surface soil. Squeeze it into a ball and then open your hand. Touch the ball with your thumb -- if it breaks apart easily and crumbles, it's dry enough to work. If it stays in a ball, it's too wet. Different parts of the garden will dry out at different rates depending on whether you are in a sandier/rockier area or an area with more clay and also whether your plot is on higher or lower ground. Although it seems as though we are having an 'early spring', we've had lots of rain lately, so be patient.

2. DON'T PLANT TOO EARLY WHEN THE GROUND IS STILL WET AND COLD

The warm days are tempting to get out there and plant, but we know that there is plenty of cold and wet weather ahead. Seeds won't germinate and then they rot if the soil is too wet. Even peas (which can go in early in the season) don't like it too cold and too wet. So unless you use some kind of covering for the plants, it's probably best to wait a while before planting even cool crops. Each garden will have some floating row cover (lightweight fabric that can sit directly on the plants and 'float' as they grow bigger) that can be placed over the plants and secured at the edges to give some protection from the cold. We won't have enough to cover everything, but you'll be able to experiment a bit to see how it works on part of your plot. Read the information under "Vegetable Seed Chart from Fedco" about soil and air temperatures needed both for seed germination and transplanting seedlings. Fedco Seeds is here in Maine, so planting dates are probably appropriate, although Cape can stay cooler longer into June.

3. MAKING RAISED BEDS WITH SOIL OR BOARDS

Many of you already have made raised beds either by piling up the soil or constructing something with wood sides. Whatever your plan, be sure that the beds are not too wide -- you want to be able to reach into the bed to plant seeds, weed, tend, and harvest without stepping on the soil in the planted area. If children are tending a bed, make the bed even narrower. Gull Crest gardeners will probably have space for three 3-foot wide beds with about 18" left for two paths. Maxwell gardeners can make four 3-foot wide beds with 12" paths. Leave the beds flattened on top or even dished a little so that when you water, the water won't just run down the side of your bed. If you have divided your plot into quarters, use the same advice. Minimize the area left for paths and be sure you can reach everything without walking on your planting area.

4. ROTATE YOUR CROPS IN YOUR PLOT

As you plan your plot, it's important to think about crop rotation and why it's vital. Each plant family takes certain nutrients out of the soil and the soil and roots may harbor certain diseases and pests that affect that family and probably not other plant families. So it is best to rotate your plantings within your plot so that you don't grow the same family of plants in the same place. A three-year rotation is best. If you have separate beds in your plot, divide each bed in half and that should give you at least 6 to 8 different planting areas in your plot depending on the number of beds. Or if you divided your plot in sections instead of rows, divide each section and then rotate everything in one direction each year. You may have to make adjustments for tall crops and shading, but try to plan your plot so that the same family of plants has a 3-year wait before planting in the same spot again. A simple sketch that you keep from year to year will be a big help.

An article in *Mother Earth News* had a very helpful listing of the plant families. If you wish, read the full article "Healthy Soil with Crop Rotation".

"You can simplify your rotations by sorting your crops into these major plant families:

Onion family: onions, garlic, leeks and shallots

Carrot family: carrots, celery, parsley and parsnips

Sunflower family: lettuce, sunflowers and a few other leafy greens

Cabbage family: cabbage, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, kale and many other leafy greens, as well as rutabagas and kohlrabi

Spinach family: beets and chard

Cucumber family: cucumbers, melons, squash and gourds

Pea family: peas and beans

Grass family: corn, wheat, oats and rye

Tomato family: tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and potatoes"

5. PLANT INTENSIVELY TO MAXIMIZE YOUR YIELD

Learn how much space each plant takes and then plant your seeds or seedlings with that spacing in mind. Some crops can be planted intensively and then harvest the thinnings, such as lettuce. Carrots always need thinning, but you don't have to plant them in a row with a lot of space in between the rows -- they need just 2 square inches per carrot once they are thinned. Bare ground is a welcome spot for weeds to grow, so use your planting area to its fullest.

6. BE CAREFUL WHERE YOU PURCHASE PLANTS

Although we do not require the purchase of organic seeds or seedlings, it's best to buy your plants from a reputable garden center or the various farmer's markets. That doesn't guarantee that the plants will be disease or pest-free, but it's probably a better choice than the big box stores or discount centers. The late blight last summer arrived from Alabama in seedlings that were sold to the big box stores and in the end, the late blight affected everyone's plants all over the northeast. Saving some money on buying a few plants from a questionable source is not a money-saver in the end.

Happy Planning for Your Garden Plot!