KPOV – *The Point*

Gardening: Get Good at It

“Spring Soil Starts Now”

October 22, 2019

The soil is a storehouse for all the elements plants need to grow: nutrients, organic matter, air, and water. Soil also provides support for plant roots. When properly prepared and cared for, soil can be improved each year and will continue to grow plants forever. Uncared for soil will soon become suited only for growing weeds.

Vegetables need a deep and well-drained soil with adequate organic matter. Good garden soil with proper moisture will not form a hard ball when squeezed in the hand. It should crumble easily when forced between the fingers. It should not crack or crust over when dry.

A favorite fall activity for many gardeners is preparing the garden soil. Turning the fresh soil is next to heaven! Fall soil preparation gives one a jumpstart on spring planting as soil is ready except for a small amount of raking.

Spading or tilling the soil in the fall allows for the winter conditions of freezing and thawing to naturally break the soil into its particles. This results in a crumbly state desirable for spring planting.

Soil is often damp or wet in the spring which makes deep spading more difficult. Tilling soil in the spring that is too wet will makes clods. Clods are extremely difficult to break down into that crumb state ideal for planting. Wet soil tilled in the fall will still break apart over the winter leaving a nice texture for planting. As a rule of thumb, soil should never be worked while it is wet as it does destroy some of the physical properties.

Fall tilling also allows for the addition of organic matter such as compost or other materials. If you have freshly raked leaves, grass clippings or straw, work the material directly into to the soil. This is an easy way to use up a lot of fall bounty in the garden after the fruits and vegetables have been harvested. Normally, a 2 to 4-inch layer of shredded leaves can be composted naturally into the soil over the winter. Spread the leaves over the garden area and spade into the soil as deeply as possible, 6 inches or more is best. A small addition of a light nitrogen fertilizer may help decompose thick leaves more quickly. A planting of rye or oats in the fall will slowly grow through the winter and can be spade under in the spring.

As the leaves break down, they supply needed organic matter for the over-wintering soils. It is almost impossible to get too much organic matter in our soils. Organic matter is like magic. Soils with a healthy amount are easy to till and naturally break apart. High organic matter soils also retain moisture while providing good aeration. This combination of properties is often what is lacking in average garden soil.

Fall tillage is also a good time to take a soil test. Additions of phosphorus and potassium can be worked into the soil as well as materials to adjust the soil pH. If these nutrients are not worked into the soil, they provide little benefit. Developing the habit of testing your soil every three years will benefit your fall harvests.

To take a soil test, collect small samples from around the garden about 6 inches deep. Mix these random samples together. One cup is needed for the actual test. There is a small fee for the test.

Enjoy the autumn days with the leaves swirling around your feet and the cool nip in the air. There is not a better feeling or smell than having freshly turned soil.

For more information and resources about the preparing your fall soil for spring planting, testing your soil, and other topics, go to our Master Gardener website at… [www.gocomga.com](http://www.gocomga.com) and click on the KPOV tab on the orange bar. Thanks for listening to… Gardening, Get Good at It on KPOV, The Point.

Resources:

Fall Garden Soil Preparation

<https://www.johnson.k-state.edu/lawn-garden/agent-articles/miscellaneous/fall-garden-soil-preparation.html>

Soil Preparation

<https://agrilifeextension.tamu.edu/library/gardening/soil-preparation/>

Gardening with Perennials

<https://web.extension.illinois.edu/perennials/bedprep.cfm>

Yard and Garden: Preparing Garden Soil for Spring Planting

<https://web.extension.illinois.edu/perennials/bedprep.cfm>