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THE GRAPEVINE
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Work Garden Soil in the Fall

Fall is the preferred time to prepare garden soil for next spring's vegetable garden. Spring is often wet making it difficult to work soil without forming clods that remain the rest of the season. Fall usually is drier allowing more time to work the soil when it is at the correct soil moisture content. Even if you work soil wet in the fall and form clods, the freezing and thawing that takes place in the winter will break them down, leaving a mellow soil the following spring. Insects often hide in garden debris. If that debris is worked into the soil, insects will be less likely to survive the winter. Diseases are also less likely to overwinter if old plants are worked under. Also, the garden debris will increase the organic matter content of the soil. Working the debris into the soil is often easier if you mow the old vegetable plants several times to reduce the size of the debris. Fall is an excellent time to add organic matter. Not only are organic materials usually more available in the fall (leaves, rotten hay or silage, grass clippings) but fresher materials can be added in the fall than in the spring because there is more time for them to break down before planting. As a general rule, add 2 inches of organic material to the surface of the soil and till it in. Be careful not to overtill. You should end up with particles like grape nuts or larger. If you work your garden into the consistency of dust, you have destroyed the soil structure.

Fall is a Good Time for Soil Testing

Though we often think of soil testing as a spring chore, fall can actually be a better time. Soil-testing laboratories are often very busy during the spring resulting in a longer turnaround from submission to recommendations. Also, soils in the spring are often waterlogged, making taking samples difficult. If your soil test suggests more organic matter, fall is a much better season because materials are more available than in the spring, and fresher materials can be used without harming young tender spring-planted plants. Begin by taking a representative sample from several locations in the garden or lawn. Each sample should contain soil from the 3 to 8 inch depth. Often times excess organic material and other detritus can alter the results, therefore I prefer to see a sample collected from the root zone. This is most easily done with a soil sampler. Many K-State Research and Extension offices have such samplers available for checkout. If you don't have a sampler, use a shovel to dig straight down into the soil. Then shave a small layer off the back of the hole for your sample. Mix the samples together in a clean plastic container and select about 1 to 1.5 cups of soil. This can be placed in a plastic container such as a re-sealable plastic bag. Take the soil to your county extension office to have tests done for a small charge at the K-State soil-testing laboratory. A soil test determines fertility problems, not other conditions that may exist such as poor drainage, poor soil structure, soil borne diseases or insects, chemical contaminants or damage, or shade with root competition from other plants. All of these conditions may reduce plant performance but cannot be evaluated by a soil test. If these conditions do exist, contact your Extension agent to discuss strategies for improving your gardening results.

Clean up Iris Beds this Fall

Iris are known for a couple of common problems: a fungus disease known as iris leaf spot and an insect named iris borer. Though both cause problems in the spring, now is the time to start control measures. Both the fungus and eggs of the borer overwinter on old, dead leaves.

Remove dead leaves and cut back healthy leaves by ½ this fall to reduce populations of these pests. Also remove other garden debris from the iris bed. This can significantly cut down on problems next spring.

Pruning Shrubs in the Fall

Though light pruning and removal of dead wood are fine this time of year, more severe pruning should be left until spring. Consider pruning to be "light" if 10% or less of the plant is removed. Dead wood does not count in this calculation. Keep in mind that even light pruning of spring-blooming shrubs such as lilac and forsythia will reduce flowers for next year. We normally recommend that spring-bloomers be pruned after flowering. Shrubs differ in how severely they can be cutback. Junipers do not break bud from within the plant and therefore should be trimmed lightly if you wish to keep the full shape. For junipers and arborvitae you must leave a curtain of green when you prune. Cutting back to the brown undergrowth will usually kill the plant. Overgrown junipers should be removed. On the other hand, there are certain shrubs that can be pruned back severely during the spring. Rejuvenation is the most severe type of pruning and may be used on multi-stem shrubs that have become too large with too many old branches to justify saving the younger canes. All stems are cut back to 3- to 5-inch stubs. This works well for spirea, forsythia, pyracantha, ninebark, Russian almond, little leaf mock orange, shrub roses, privet, spirea and flowering quince. Just remember that spring is the correct time to do this, not now.

Harvesting and Curing Black Walnut

Black walnuts are ready to be harvested when the hull can be dented with your thumb. You can also wait until the nuts start falling from the tree. Either way it is important to hull walnuts soon after harvest. If not removed, the hull will leach a stain through the nut and into the meat. The stain will not only discolor the meats but also give them an off flavor. There are several ways to hull walnuts including running them through a corn sheller or pounding each nut through a hole in a board. The hole must be big enough for the nut but smaller than the hull. An easier way is to run over the nuts with a lawn tractor. This will break the hull but not crack the nut. Note that walnut hulls contain a dye that will stain concrete, your hands or about anything else it touches. Wear gloves as the stain is almost impossible to remove. Wash hulled nuts by spreading them out on the lawn or on a wire mesh and spraying them with water or placing them in a tub of water. If you place them in a tub, the good nuts should sink. Those that float are probably not well-filled with kernels. Next, dry the nuts by spreading them in layers no more than three deep in a cool, shady and dry place such as a garage or tool shed. Drying normally takes two weeks.