

Spring gardening begins in Winter

WASHINGTON — If you're a backyard gardener, this is the time of year to prepare for next Spring's planting. U.S. Department of Agriculture horticulturist Robert Wearne offers these tips to help you.

— If you still have crops such as collards, kale or turnip greens growing, work around them. The cold and snow enhance their flavor and you can still get good meals from them.

— Clean up old plant material. It's best to destroy any plants badly diseased or infested by insects, such as white flies. While cold weather may prevent the insects from surviving the winter, old plants can give them protection.

— Save healthy, undiseased plant material to dig back into your garden or to compost. Collect enough leaves to make a three-inch deep layer on the garden. Compost any extra leaves for use as mulch during the growing season. If asked, your city street department

may even deliver some to your home from their fall leaf cleanup. Shredding leaves with your lawn mower helps them work into the soil faster or break down faster during composting. Leaves help sandy soil retain moisture and allow clay soil to drain moisture.

— If you haven't had a soil test for two or three years, do it now. Soils can become too acid from fertilizers and organic materials or too alkaline from buildup of sodium, calcium or other salts. Your local county extension agent, listed in the telephone directory under the name of your county, can tell you how to prepare the soil sample, where to have it tested and what the test shows your soil needs. Discuss with him the need for a separate nitrogen test.

— Fall is the best time to add lime and organic matter. By Spring, it should be effective.

— Plow or spade the lime, leaves and other organic material roughly into the

soil. Rain, snow and the freezing and thawing of winter will break down the dirt clods and help incorporate the lime. A garden Fall plowed generally requires only raking in preparation for Spring planting.

— Correct any drainage problems. One way is to establish raised beds about four feet wide, four inches high and the length of your garden. Leave enough space for you to walk between the beds.

— Finally, clean up your equipment to protect it for next year. Clean off tomato stakes and metal tomato cages. Dirt and old plant material causes cages to rust. After removing the dirt from your garden tools, oil a cloth and rub them down to retard rust. If you have a garden tractor, drain the fuel from it and run the engine until all the fuel in it is burned up. Otherwise the gas will evaporate over winter and leave a gum deposit in the engine. Also,

remove the spark plug, put a little oil in the cylinder and turn the engine over to spread the oil over the walls. Then replace the plug.

Wearne gave these additional tips to remember next season. "Many gardens aren't as successful as they could be for lack of proper watering. Set some empty coffee cans under the sprinkler next year when watering. One to two inches of water in the cans means the water has probably seeped down about four to six inches. The soil should be moist down past the plants' root zone, at least 15 inches.

"Time your watering and dig down to see how far the water soaks through the soil in a given time. Then you'll know how many minutes to water your garden.

"Mulching keeps weeds down and reduces the amount of water required to keep the plants growing.

"Even though home gardens are usually small, it's good to rotate your crops. Don't always grow

tomatoes, for instance, in the same place. This helps control plant insect and disease pests. It helps control weeds and improve your garden soil, too," said Wearne.

Wearne said home gardeners should start small, with two or three tomato plants, some radishes and a few other vegetables they like and work up to larger gardens. Part of the fun of gardening, he said, is knowing how to do it properly so he suggests home gardeners learn about soil preparation, and how to care for and fertilize the soil and become familiar with gardening techniques.

"People should learn to distinguish between beneficial and harmful insects," he said. "You don't need to spray a whole garden just to get rid of insects on a few plants. You can pick off by hand the cabbage loopers your garden will probably attract. And you can make little foil 'collars' placed an inch above and below the ground to keep cutworms from killing your transplants


plants, cabbage, for instance."

Wearne also suggests gardeners watch catalogs to experiment with new varieties that may be more productive in their location or be more insect or disease resistant.

Two final tips: be careful not to bring insects into your home when you bring your house plants in for the winter. Inspect them well first. Insects multiply in a warm home and can be difficult to control.

And for everyone now harvesting their green tomatoes, Wearne suggests pulling up the entire vine, knocking the dirt off and hanging it on a wire or nail in the basement or other cool, dark place, to allow the larger tomatoes to ripen.


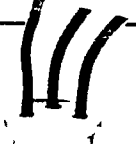
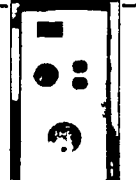

For those who have already picked their tomatoes, Wearne suggest wrapping the larger ones individually in newspaper to help ripen them. The small green ones, he said, are good for making relishes and all green tomatoes are delicious when properly fried.




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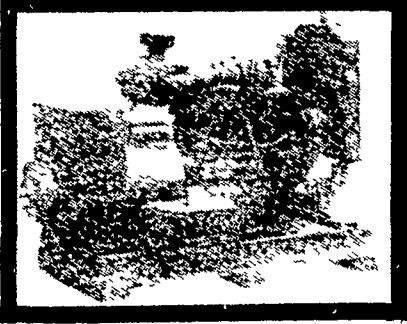
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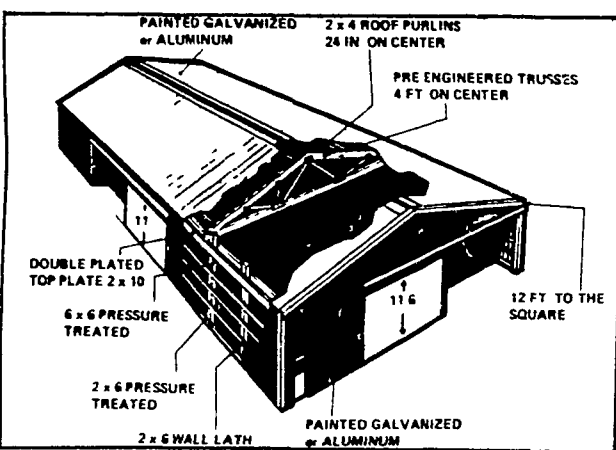
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