

Beautiful Flowers Begin With The Soil

UNIVERSITY PARK, (Center Co.)-If you're planning a flower garden this summer, start getting your soil in shape now. Soil preparation can save you time, labor and money as well as rewarding you with beautiful plants.

"Preparing the soil is the most important step in gardening," says Dr. J. Robert Nuss, professor of ornamental horticulture in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences. "Have your soil tested this spring, and use the test results and recommendations as a guide."

A soil test measures nutrient amounts and pH, or level of acidity. Soil pH is measured on a scale of 0 to 14, with 0 being the most acid, 14 the most alkaline and 7 neutral. Most soils naturally have pH levels ranging between 5 and 8. "Many flowers do well in a range between 6 and 7, so chances are you won't need to change your soil's pH much," says Nuss.

Don't guess when it comes to fertilizing and changing pH. Over-applying chemicals can harm soil and plants as well as pollute groundwater and streams.

"Excess lime raises the soil's pH above what plants can tolerate, makes it more difficult for them to draw nutrients from the soil and slows growth of beneficial soil microorganisms," says Nuss. "Some flowers prefer a more acid soil and can suffer from iron deficiency if you apply too much lime."

Soil test kits are available at Penn State Cooperative Extension county offices and larger garden centers for a nominal fee. County extension kits include instructions for collecting soil samples as well as the address of Penn State's soil testing laboratory. Samples can be mailed or delivered to the laboratory.

You will receive test results in about two weeks. Results include levels of potassium, calcium, phosphorus and magnesium, along

with the soil's pH. Also included are recommendations for the kinds and amounts of fertilizer to apply and how much lime if any to add to the soil.

"If you're planning to grow rhododendrons, azaleas, laurels or other flowers that prefer acid soil, you may need to apply a chemical such as sulfur, which lowers pH," says Nuss. "Apply no more than the recommended amount."

Till the recommended materials about 5 inches into the soil. While working the soil, remove stones, sod clumps, weed and debris.

"Work in several inches of organic matter," says Nuss. "There's little danger of adding too much. Composted kitchen scraps, well-rotted manures, lawn clippings and decayed plant

material all are good forms of organic matter. They help retain water and supply nutrients for your flowers."

After tilling, your soil is ready for seeds or transplants. Feed transplants with a starter solution containing 2 tablespoons of high-phosphorous fertilizer diluted in a gallon of water. Pour 1 cup of the solution around the roots of each new transplant.

"Phosphorous is critical for getting new flowers off to a good start," says Nuss. "Without it, roots will develop slowly and plants will be weak."

Add 2 to 3 inches of organic mulch on top of the soil around your plants. Mulch helps keep soil moist, prevents erosion, discour-

ages weeds and builds up the soil's organic matter. "Mulch also tends to be more attractive than bare soil in a ornamental garden," says Nuss. "It keeps mud from splashing on your flowers and gives the ground's surface uniform color and texture."

Several kinds of mulch are available at garden centers, including wood bark chips, shredded bark and peat. If you use grass clippings, leaves or well-decayed compost, periodically loosen them with a hand cultivator or hoe to prevent surface crusting.

When your plants begin to flower, sprinkle 2 tablespoons of high-nitrogen fertilizer on the soil about 6 inches away from the base of each plant. This will enhance flowering and give plants a boost

for the rest of the summer. "If you fertilize too soon, however, you will delay the plants' maturity and decrease the number of flowers," says Nuss. "Wait until the first flowers open."

Finally, retest your flower garden's fertility and pH levels each year for several seasons. If reports remain similar, you can reduce sampling to every 3 to 4 years. "Nutrient levels and pH gradually change over time," says Nuss. "It's important to keep monitoring the soil to keep levels optimum."

Soil test kits may be purchased for \$6 at Penn State Cooperative Extension offices or in 111 Agricultural Analysis Services Laboratory, Tower Road, University Park, Monday-Friday, 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Herb And Geranium Sale To Be Held

LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.)-The 16th annual Herb and Geranium Sale, sponsored by the Susquehanna Unit of the Herb Society of America, will be held on Saturday, May 6 from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. at the Farm and Home Center, 1383 Arcadia Road, Lancaster.

A wide variety of herb plants will be offered for sale including those used for cooking, fragrance, dyes, wreaths and other arrangements, repelling insects, and herbal tea. Specialty plants potted from members' gardens will also be available as well as a selection of wildflowers and scented geraniums. This year the Unit is featuring native American plants as well as plants which attract hummingbirds and other birds, honeybees, and butterflies. Each of these will be clearly identified.

This year's educational exhibit features Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*). Noted Marietta artist Henry Libhart has donated an original botanical watercolor of

this native American plant to the Susquehanna Unit. Matted prints will be available at the sale.

Susquehanna Unit members are quite knowledgeable and eager to assist patrons in their selection of plants and will be happy to share their tips for planting, growing and usage. One member who specializes in raising scented geraniums will be available to discuss the cultivation of these interesting plants. Garden leaf carriers will be available as well as herb books and gardening items and "cookbooklets" compiled by the Unit and including many favorite herb recipes.

To help both the novice and the experienced gardener, all plants are identified by tag which includes the botanical name, common name, growth habit, usages and planting instructions.

It is suggested that patrons arrive early for the best plant selection. In an effort to encourage recycling, it is suggested that patrons bring their own baskets and

boxes to carry purchases.

Geraniums will be available in a wide variety of colors. These can be ordered ahead of time by calling (717) 768-3071.

Proceeds from the sale help support the Herb Garden at the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C. and the scholarship fund of the Herb Society which is used for research.

Rural Youth Reunion

The 58th anniversary of the organization of Lancaster County Rural Youth will be celebrated with a banquet at the Hershey Farm Restaurant on the Strasburg Pike on May 6.

Former members and friends are asked to bring pictures and items of interest to share at the 5:30 p.m. fellowship hour. Dinner will be served at 6:00 and the cost is \$14.50 per person.

Reservations should be sent to Mrs. Carl Diller, 2112 South View Road, Lancaster, PA 17602. Phone (717) 464-2233. They must be received by April 15th.

The program will consist of aerial views of Lancaster County farms by the Lancaster Alliance for New Directions. Also on the program will be a short skit from an early play "The Campbells Are Coming" and group singing.

The Lancaster County Rural Youth was an active group of rural young people who met monthly. They enjoyed square dancing and educational speakers. Some were members of an orchestra, some performed plays, and a monthly newspaper was published. There were at least 20 couples who met and later married from this group.

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Leola Produce Auction, Inc. will open the 1995 season on Tuesday, April 4, 1995. Sale will begin at 10:00 A.M.

The Produce Auction will be having sales every Tuesday and Thursday at 10:00 AM until further notice.

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