

What to do now in the yard

By RALPH EDWARDS
Huntsville Nursery

It's spring time! A changeable time, warm then cold, winter is losing its grip, summer is beginning to take hold. Spring is a wonderful time here in the Northeast. Our thoughts turn to renewal and rebirth. As our world awakens from winter's sleep the grass slowly turns a wonderful spring green, seen only at this time of year.

The trees slowly bud and the familiar sounds of birds and wildlife not heard for months fill the air. We seem to have this primal urge to dig into the earth, get our hands into the soil. Oh yes, this is spring.

Spring is a frenzy time in the yard and garden world. On a warm day we are like bees around the hive as we buzz around our homes and yards with many projects to do. I'd like to talk about some of those yard and garden projects done in the spring.

A good cleanup of the yard and garden is essential. Clean up those leaves, twigs, branches and clinders from along the road and drive. Put them on the compost pile. A good cleanup gives immediate gratification. A little raking of the lawn areas removes thatch and allows moisture and nutrients to penetrate lawn surfaces.

You also should consider replenishing your plant bed mulches. Common mulches are shredded bark mulch and peat humus. Decorative stone is also popular. Freshening up your mulches gives a nice appearance and also helps to hold moisture in the soil, keep at this time. For lawns in bad shape a tilling job, topsoil and reseeding can restore problem areas or entire lawns. Feed all plantings with common fertilizers such as 5-10-5, Hollytone, Plan-tone, Miracle-Grow or Miracel. Tree and shrub fertilizer spikes are great for larger trees, shrubs or evergreens. Don't forget to till the garden, add some compost, lime and fertilizer and then it's ready for planting.

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(Source: U.S. Department of Energy)

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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 seven neutral. Most soils naturally have pH levels ranging between five and eight. "Most flowers do well in a range between six and seven, so change 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. Overapplying 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 five inches into the soil. While working with the soil, remove stones, sod clumps, weeds 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 two tablespoons of high-phosphorus fertilizer diluted in a gallon of water. Pour one cup of the solution around the roots of each new transplant.

"Phosphorus 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 two to three inches of organic mulch on top of the soil around your plants. Mulch helps keep soil moist, prevents erosion, discourages weeds and builds up the soil's organic matter. "Mulch also tends to be more attractive of high-nitrogen fertilizer on the 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 two tablespoons of high-nitrogen fertilizer on the soil about six 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 three or four 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.

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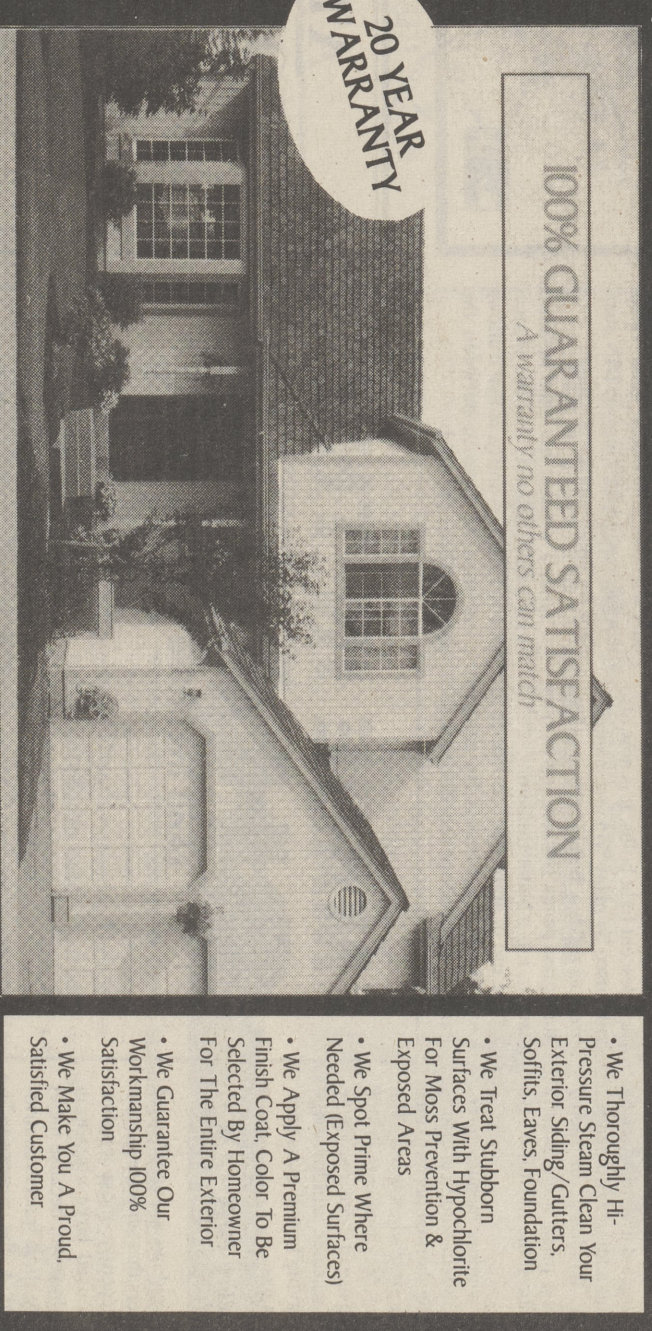
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