



Give Your Garden a “Tune-up” for Spring Planting
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The days are getting longer and warmer – it’s a sure sign that the planting season is finally here! You may already be fantasizing about your summer bounty of tasty vegetables and bundles of fresh cut flowers. But, before you put any seeds or plants in the ground, try giving your garden a quick tune-up to help ensure success.

First, take a look at the sunlight. If your plants will require direct sunlight make sure the garden plot gets at least 6 to 8 hours every day. Keep in mind that the angle of the sun will be changing as the summer season progresses. Think ahead and anticipate for creeping shadows or perhaps some areas getting too much afternoon sun. Also, in gardening terms, size matters. Too large of a garden plot could become a burden if it requires more time and resources than you can provide. Perhaps start a small garden this year and expand next spring?

What kind of shape is the soil? It needs to have good water flow, drainage and aeration. To improve these qualities simply add an organic amendment such as compost, manure, sawdust or leaves. Remember, a soil amendment goes *in* the soil to change its composition. A mulch, such as bark chips, pine needles or hay goes *on* the soil to keep it cool, provide weed control and conserve moisture.

Before adding an amendment, turn the dirt with a spade or rototiller to a depth of at least six inches. Break up the clods until the soil is pulverized into pea-sized granules.

Very few home gardeners ever check their garden soil’s pH – its relative acidity or alkalinity. The pH is important because it influences numerous chemical reactions that occur in the soil, including the availability of the nutrients essential for healthy plant growth and development. Most crops do best when the pH is neutral or slightly acidic. Measuring soil pH can be done easily with a soil test kit which can be purchased at most garden centers. They are relatively cheap and reliable.

Garden soils are seldom fertile enough to supply all of the nutrients a good vegetable garden needs. Our local soils contain most of the essential nutrients, but vegetable gardens typically need a good dose of added nitrogen. Many gardens can also benefit from a more complete fertilizer application containing phosphorus and potassium. Talk to your local nurseryman for guidance.

The general belief that organic materials are better sources of plant nutrients than inorganic forms is incorrect. Plants respond equally well to organic or inorganic (chemical) forms of fertilizer.

Few gardeners truly enjoy weeding. But, it's a necessary part of the gardening experience. Weeds are nothing more than plants out of place. They compete with the plants for sun, space, moisture and nutrients. Weeds can also harbor insects. Even the best soils will require some weeding. The best approach to weed management is to remove them manually. However gardeners sometimes choose to use an herbicide (a chemical weed killer) to control weeds. If you decide to use an herbicide, it must be tested and receive label registration from the EPA. Each label will list those plants, crops, or conditions in which the material may be used. Check the label carefully before any chemical is used. Especially if it'll be used around edible plants.

The final phase of your garden tune-up is to give your watering system a close look. The cold winter and hard freezes may have done some damage. Make sure leaks haven't developed in the hose connections or the distribution system. With this year's water levels being less than ideal, water conservation is extremely important.

Learn more about soil, composting and organic fertilizer from Master Gardener Virginia Feagans this Saturday, April 6, 2013 at the free public class: Organic Gardening I. Class will be held 9:00 a.m. to noon at the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Drive, Placerville.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.