

How to Prepare a Garden Bed: To Dig or Not to Dig



Photo, tomatoes, Special to the Democrat: It's time to prepare the soil for spring gardening season

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Despite the recent cold winter weather, spring gardening season is really not that far away. Now is the time to prepare your garden plot or bed. This preparation can apply to landscape beds, perennial beds, annuals and especially vegetable gardens.

When breaking new ground or renovating an old bed, you have several choices as how to proceed. The traditional method is to spade up the area. This is a good method to immediately incorporate organic matter, especially into heavy clay or sandy soils. The limitation is that with established beds and shade gardens under trees, you cannot avoid cutting and otherwise disturbing plant roots. Also, digging alters the biology of the soil. Plant growth is enhanced by beneficial fungi that exist in a symbiotic relationship with plant root systems. So, here is an alternative that you might like to try.

It's called layering, sheet composting, or the "lasagna" method. Pick an area that is suitable for what you want to plant. If the bed will be replacing lawn all that is necessary is to mow the grass short.

The next step is to block out light so weed seeds don't sprout. This is done by covering the area with overlapping sheets of brown cardboard or five or more layers of news paper (not the glossy advertizing stuff that comes with the Sunday paper). Wet down the paper to keep it from blowing away. Immediately add a three-quarter inch or more layer of weed-free compost or comparable material.

Followed this with alternate thick and thin layers; fluffy material like hay, straw and leaves and thin layers of richer nitrogen containing material such as organic fertilizers, mushroom compost, soybean meal, etc. Repeat thick with thin until you have a one to two foot depth of layers. This organic material will breakdown over time and provide a very fertile substrate for your plants that is only a few inches deep. However, the bed can be planted immediately by simply digging down and inserting your plants into the soil and readymade mulch. If you give it a few months time before planting, your “lasagna” bed will be in even better condition to receive your new plantings.

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