

The Press Democrat
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ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS **Do this before you plant this spring**

Question: I want to grow some vegetables and herbs in my home garden. What tasks need doing before I plant my garden?

Answer: A bit of planning, cleanup and repair now will save you aggravation and disappointment later in the season. A good first step is to check the condition of your garden soil.

This region has had so much rain this year, it's possible that the soil will be too soggy and wet for immediate planting.

Soil in raised beds will warm and dry out faster than soil that is part of the ground and surrounding ecosystem; so, assess them separately.

After a heavy rain, wait a few days to plant, otherwise working the soil will compress the pores in the soil structure that carry air and water to plant roots.

The soil should crumble in your hands before planting. Most plants prefer soils that are loamy and friable. Here in Sonoma County our most common soil types are clay and sand.

In some home gardens the natural topsoil has been removed during construction and replaced with fill. Don't worry, we just need to keep amending the soil with organic material such as compost.

Clay soil is heavy, dense and limits a plant's access to air and water. Sandy soil has good drainage but dries out quickly and has fewer available nutrients.

As home gardeners we need to work with the soil we have. The truth is that gardens in Sonoma County are some of the most productive in the country.

Through regular amending of garden soil with compost, the texture and bioavailability of nutrients improve and the soil environment becomes a moisture reservoir.

Replenish nutrients used by last season's crops by adding two inches of compost on top of the soil. Minimize tillage to preserve delicate soil structure.

Through the action of macro and microorganisms and earthworms in healthy soil, we can transform our gardens into biodiverse havens that also help to mitigate climate

change. Not digging creates habitat for carbon-storing microbes, sequestering carbon in the soil and thereby limiting greenhouse gases.

The soil should be weed-free before planting. This time of year, the soil is still soft and pliable, so pulling weeds is much easier than it will be once the soil hardens up. Try to get weeds out before they go to seed and propagate even more weeds.

If you have drip irrigation, it's time to check for damage and leaks, and ensure that all the emitters are working. If you are on a well, clean or replace drip irrigation filters.

If you don't already have drip irrigation set up, this is a great time to install it. Your garden will thank you and you will save yourself effort, time and worry as we move into our hot summer months.

April is a good time to build or purchase trellises for spring/summer crops that may require support or that you wish to grow vertically. Install the trellis before planting so that you don't disturb plant roots. Vegetables that do well on a trellis include cucumbers, peas, squash and small melons, and beans.

Question: What are good plants to put in the ground now? Local plant nurseries have lots of plants out for sale already, but I'm thinking it might be best to choose some cooler weather tolerant plants now and wait a few more weeks to plant heat loving plants. Is that a good idea?

Answer: Yes, that's exactly right. Master Gardeners have a saying: "right plant, right place, right time." A good plan is to plant early and mid-spring food plants now and to wait until mid-May to plant heat loving plants. In our experience, tomatoes, peppers, eggplants and basil grow much faster when the soil has warmed up and there are more hours of sunlight. Sadly, you may have to replace warm weather loving plants if you've planted them too soon. If you decide to risk it, and a late frost is forecast, place row covers over warm season plants and seeded areas.

A shortlist of cool weather vegetables and herbs to plant now includes: lettuce, radishes, kale, spinach, chard, cabbage, bunch onions, bulb onions, leeks, chives, peas, broccoli, collards, turnips, carrots, beets, parsley, thyme, oregano, tarragon and dill. All these plants can withstand a light frost. Once you've planted, monitor soil moisture in planted areas so you know when to begin irrigating. Soil may dry out an inch or so on the surface but still retain ample moisture under mulch in the root zone around well-established plants. Hand water new plants as needed. Once the plant is about six inches tall and has a sturdy stem, apply a layer of mulch, such as rice straw, over the entire garden bed to help conserve soil moisture and keep down weeds. Leave a two-inch mulch free circle around the central stem of each young seedling plant to prevent damping off infection.

As you select your plant starts or seeds, read the information on the plant identification labels or seed packets. Look for plants that are drought and heat

tolerant, check the amount of sunlight and moisture the plant requires, and note the days to maturity. With our warm climate and long growing season, vital vegetable seeds germinate well when the soil temperature is at least 60° to 65°F.

Bear in mind that plant starts will mature and vegetables will be ready for harvest many weeks sooner than a plant started from seed, but there is something marvelous about choosing a particular plant to tend from seed through harvest. Whatever you choose to plant, Happy Gardening!

For detailed information consult our Master Gardener website.

[https://sonomamg.ucanr.edu/Food Gardening](https://sonomamg.ucanr.edu/Food_Gardening)

Contributors to this week's column were Sally Singingtree and Diane Judd. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County (sonomamg.ucanr.edu) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to toscmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.