

Unique Garden Centre

WARM UP YOUR SOIL

Spring is here and if you are like me you can't wait to get out in the garden and plant. The question is "When is the soil warm enough?" Well, if you pre-warm your soil, you can plant up to three weeks earlier!

Soil needs to be warm enough to germinate seeds and for transplants to grow. The location, type of soil, moisture conditions and whether or not there is mulch on the soil will affect the warming rate of the soil. Shaded areas are slower to warm up than sunny areas. Soil worked up in the fall will warm quicker than undisturbed soil. Clay or wet soil will take longer to warm up especially if it has mulch on it as well.

Some types of seeds need warmer soil than others. Warming the soil enables you to plant earlier. For cool weather plants you can take advantage of the cooler days that these plants like better to grow and produce. Examples of these would be peas, radishes, onions and garlic (if you didn't plant it in the fall). Peas do not like the heat of the summer so the earlier you get them in the better. Other crops like corn, need the soil to be quite warm in order to germinate. Planted in soil that is too cool, corn seeds will just rot in the ground. In the case of transplants, if the soil is still too cool, the plants will go into shock and may never recover. Keeping the soil warm can also help hot-weather vegetables, such as tomatoes, squash and melons.

One of the best ways to pre-warm your soil in the spring is with plastic, either clear or black. Research has shown that clear plastic will warm the soil faster. Because it also lets the light through, you will also have great weed germination. This can be a good thing as you can kill these weeds easily when you remove the plastic to plant. Black plastic works just as well, just a little slower and without germinating the weeds. Black plastic takes about 5 to 7 days of sunny weather to warm the soil, so put it out seven to 10 days before you expect to plant. This allows time for cloudy days when no warming can occur. Before applying the plastic, areas should be prepared to the point where one could seed.



Step one: After 7-10 days the soil should be warm enough for planting. Remove the plastic and replace with black landscape fabric if you wish to use mulch. Using landscape fabric in this manner is great when working with transplants. Cut an "X" in the fabric.

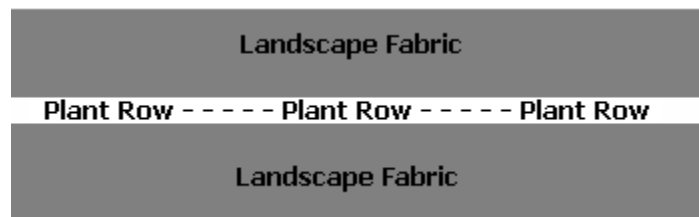


Step two: Open up the fabric from the "X". Dig your hole as you would for any other seedling and plant it. Gently fold back the fabric.



Step three: After planting, lay a row cover over the seedlings to hold in heat or cover them with a cloche. This is important as there is always a high risk of overnight frost in the early spring. If using a cloche, be sure to provide venting on warmer days so you don't overheat the young plants.

Another method for the vegetable garden is to cut the landscape fabric to the width of the path between the rows, leaving a small space for the vegetables to grow through. The fabric can be rolled up in the fall to work the garden and re-used next year. Add a thin layer of mulch for added aesthetics and moisture conservation. This also helps to keep veggies clean and topsoil from eroding. There are two main advantages of replacing the plastic used to warm up the soil in the spring with the fabric for the rest of the year. One, the fabric breaths and therefore reduces mold and mildew problems. Two, fabric allows water to move through and thereby waters the roots more effectively.



To speed things up in the spring be sure to take care of things in the fall. Turn over the beds with a spade and work in any soil amendments you want to add. Then in the spring the beds just have to warmed up and they are ready to plant.

Note

For additional water conservation, pin soaker hoses beside row and before applying mulch. Soaker hoses are designed for slow water application. Watering in this manner allows all the water to be utilized and none is wasted due to run off or evaporation. The first few times you use a soaker hose, you have to monitor it carefully to ensure that enough water is applied to the soil. Dig down in several areas 6 to 10 inches, check the moisture levels. If the ground is evenly moist, note how long you had the water running. If the soil still has dry patches, then leave the water on a while longer and check again.