

Spring Splendor!

Prepare now for a brilliant growing season

BY SCOTT PHILP AND ALICE NEER

Think of a nearby home with beautiful gardens. They look incredible during bloom, bringing color and wildlife to the property. Whether formal or natural, these areas help create spaces that can be enjoyed by homeowners and their guests during all four seasons. As you enjoy the sights, sounds and smells during the summer months, more than likely someone spent time during the early spring preparing these beds for planting—and quite possibly even started the fall before. A few timely procedures can also help you unlock the full potential of your landscape beds and gardens too.

Soil testing is extremely important and can be done in the fall to prepare beds for spring planting. The availability of nutrients to plant material varies based on soil pH, and a level of 6.5 provides an optimum growing habitat for most plantings. An exception to this rule would be acid loving blue hydrangea varieties whose flowers are deepest blue when soil pH hovers around 5.2-5.5 (pink hydrangea varieties thrive in a soil with a pH of 6.0-6.2). Soil test kits can be obtained from your lo-

cal garden center or sent in to a Michigan State University lab through your local MSU extension office. A sandwich bag-sized sample works best; be sure to pull small amounts of soil from the entire bed to provide the most accurate results possible. For larger properties, sending in two, three or more samples may be necessary. Sending samples in during the spring season may not allow enough time for turnaround before plants come out of dormancy.

The ground must be thawed before any soil preparation can take place. You may amend existing soils with composted leaves and other organic matter to add nutrients if desired. However, be careful not to add material from diseased plants/trees, which may affect this year's plantings. Make sure the compost material is distributed evenly on the surface and tilled into the soil so it breaks down rapidly. Sphagnum peat moss can also be added to existing soil to hold additional moisture and help alleviate compaction, promoting vigorous root growth. While sphagnum peat moss has no nutritional value, composted ma-



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nure is a great source of nutrition for plant material. It may be available in bags or bulk from your local garden center and is a great source of nitrogen.

You can till your garden as soon as the ground is thawed in the spring. Tilling annual pockets and vegetable gardens is extremely beneficial. You may want to till the ground once in one direction, wait a few days, and till in the other direction. When tilling, fertilizer should be added (12-12-12 for example). Fertilizer containing osmocote releases nutrients slower and allows plants to be fed for a longer period of time. After tilling, rake out lumps and create a flat planting surface.

Perennial gardens are harder to till because many healthy roots may be damaged. You may be able to till around perennials if there is enough room for a small tiller to be used (approx. 1.5 feet). Be careful of tender roots and to not damage the plant while tilling. Early spring is a great time to split and divide appropriate perennial species if they are becoming too large for the space or if you would like to create other beds with existing plant material.

Remove debris and any weeds that may have crept in over the course of the previous season. Perennials can be fertilized in the spring and fall using a 12-12-12 mix (for example). Cut back all perennials that were not cut back the previous fall. You can cut back any perennial plant except for shrubs. Woody perennials (including Russian sage and lavender) may be cut back in the fall. Perennial grasses may be cut back in the fall, or left until spring for added winter interest.

Depending on the size of your planting beds, spring preparation may take anywhere from an hour to the better part of a day. Spending this time is essential to unlocking the true potential of your garden. If you are not up to this task, a reputable local landscape company can provide additional site-specific information and skilled staff members to help prepare your garden for an incredible upcoming success! □

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