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VEGETABLES

The Last Tomatoes of the Season



Cold nights are increasing in frequency hinting at frosts yet to come. If you have tomatoes, you may have some that are approaching maturity. Leave them on the vine until mature or until a frost is forecast. Tomatoes will ripen off the vine but must have reached a certain phase of maturity called the 'mature green stage.' These tomatoes are mature enough to harvest though not yet red. Look for full-sized tomatoes with a white, star-shaped zone at the bottom end of the fruit.

When harvesting fruit before a frost, separate the tomatoes into three groups for storage: those that are mostly red, those that are just starting to turn, and those that are still green. Discard any tomatoes with defects such as rots or breaks in the skin. Place the tomatoes on cardboard trays or cartons but use layers of newspaper to separate fruit if stacked. Occasionally a tomato may start to rot and leak juice. The newspaper will keep the juice from contacting nearby or underlying fruit. Store all the groups of tomatoes at as close to 55 degrees as possible until needed. (WU)

MISCELLANEOUS

Fall a Good Time for Soil Testing

Though we often think of soil testing as a spring chore, fall can actually be a better time. Soil-testing laboratories are often very busy during the spring resulting in a longer turnaround from submission to recommendations. Also, soils in the spring are often waterlogged, making taking samples difficult. If your soil test suggests more organic matter, fall is a much better season because materials are much more available than in the spring, and fresher materials can be used without harming young tender plants.



Begin by taking a representative sample from several locations in the garden or lawn. Each sample should contain soil from the surface to about 6 to 8 inches deep. This is most easily done with a soil sampler. Many K-State Research and Extension offices have such samplers available for checkout. If you don't have a sampler, use a shovel to dig straight down into the soil. Then shave a small layer off the back of the hole for your sample. Mix the samples together in a clean plastic container and select about 1 to 1.5 cups of soil. This can be placed in a plastic container such as a resealable plastic bag. Take the soil to your county extension office to have tests done at the K-State soil-testing laboratory for a small charge. A soil test determines fertility problems, note other conditions that may exist such as poor drainage, poor soil structure, soil borne diseases or insects, chemical contaminants or damage, or shade with root competition from other plants. All of these conditions may reduce plant performance but cannot be evaluated by a soil test. (WU)

Amending Soils with Sand



Sand is sometimes suggested as an amendment material for clay soils. However, there is good reason to be cautious about using sand. In order for sand to be effective in breaking up a clay soil, sand grains must touch one another so there are pore spaces between grains that can hold air and/or water. If the grains do not touch, the clay fills in all the voids between the sand particles leaving no room for pores. This is the same principle used to make concrete and the result is somewhat the same. You end up making a bad situation worse.

So how much sand does it take for it to be effective? Normally, we consider about 80 percent sand to be sufficient. In most cases this makes the use of sand impractical. The addition of organic matter is a much better choice. (WU)

Work Garden Soil in the Fall



Fall is the preferred time to prepare garden soil for next spring's vegetable garden. The spring season is often wet making it difficult to work soil without forming clods that remain the rest of the season. Fall is usually drier allowing you more time to work the soil when it is at the correct soil moisture content. Even if you work soil wet in the fall and form clods, the freezing and thawing that takes place in the winter will break them down, leaving a mellow soil the following spring.

Insects often hide in garden debris. If that debris is worked into the soil, insects will be less likely to survive the winter. Diseases are also less likely to overwinter if old plants are worked under.

Also, the garden debris will increase the organic matter content of the soil. Working the debris into the soil is often easier if you mow the old vegetable plants several times to reduce the size of the debris.

Fall is an excellent time to add organic matter. Not only are organic materials usually more available in the fall (leaves, rotten hay or silage, grass clippings) but fresher materials can be added in the fall than in the spring because there is more time for them to break down before planting. As a general rule, add 2 inches of organic material to the surface of the soil and till it in. Be careful not to overtill. You should end up with particles like grape nuts or larger. If you work your garden into the consistency of dust, you have destroyed the structure of the soil. (WU)

Preserving Wood Tool Handles



Hoes, shovels and other common garden tools often have wooden handles that can deteriorate over time. Storing tools in a protected location can slow that process, but normal use will still expose the tools to the elements. The end of the season is a good time to clean up and protect the handles so they will last for many years.

Weathering can raise the grain of wood, resulting in splinters. A light sanding can smooth the handle. Follow that with a light application of wood preservative, linseed oil or polyurethane to protect the wood. Wipe off any excess after a few minutes as oil-based products can attract dirt. Some gardeners then use colored tape or paint to make the tool more visible in your neighbor's garage. (WU)

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