

## HOME &amp; GARDEN

# If your soil is friable, get to work

By PAT LEUCHTMAN  
Recorder Columnist

Last week's "tropical" temperatures and a heavy warm rain over the weekend combined to remove most of the snow from my hill. For the first time since last November there is more exposed earth than snow, and it is a thrilling sight.

I went out into the garden yesterday to see how the row of carrots I had mulched and left in the garden for storage over the winter had fared. I know a number of people who do this quite successfully, but it was my first attempt.

The ground squished beneath my feet as I walked down the path, but I discovered the soil in the raised bed was well drained as I began to dig. There was a cold, damp wind blowing, and I only dug up the first 3 or 4 feet of row — just enough to dig up one sound carrot and the remains of several others that had recently provided some subterranean creature with a fine feast. Surprisingly I also dug up a couple of onions that I had missed in the fall. I had interplanted them with the carrots to discourage insects. They won't keep long, but they were fresh and deli-

icious, a welcome addition to my stew.

Now that I can see the soil, the arrival of spring is starting to seem like a real possibility, and the time to start digging is near at hand.

As my walk through the garden proved, however, it is still a little early to begin working the soil. It is important to wait until the soil has dried out or the structure of the soil can be damaged. If you can actually wring out a fistful of soil, as I can now, it is obviously too wet to work. If a fistful of soil can be squeezed into a ball, it is still too set, but if it is dry enough to crumble, the soil is said to be friable and you can get right to work.

One of the first chores of the season should be to test your soil. Even a simple PH test that will tell you if your soil is acid or alkaline will be very helpful. In our part of the world most soils are acid and will probably need a liming. Most vegetables prefer a PH that falls within the range 6.2-6.8, just slightly acid. In addition, raising the PH of a too-acid soil will release nutrients that are in the soil but that are otherwise unavailable.

After testing the soil you will know what

## BETWEEN THE ROWS

elements your soil needs to be most productive. Liming to improve the PH can be done in the fall or the early spring. In the spring I also spread manure, chicken house cleanings, compost and rock phosphate on the garden to be tilled in.

This is the time of year to decide definitely what new methods can be used to increase the productivity of the garden.

To cut down on soil compaction, which can decrease the plant's root's ability to grow vigorously, and gather in all the necessary nutrients, I plant most of my garden in wide rows and in raised beds. This also cuts down on the weeding I have to do because established beds of sturdy plants tend to shade out weeds so that they cannot take over.

My wide rows are about 2½ to 3 feet wide so that I can easily work from either side of the path, weeding and harvesting easily. I simply mark off a rectangle, fertilize, prepare the seed bed and plant my

seeds. I use a closer spacing than that usually recommended on the seed packets.

A little more work goes into the preparation of a raised bed. I dig out my paths slightly and put the extra earth onto the bed, which is then raised about a foot above the level of the path. Into the bed, I work my fertilizer, manure and compost. As with the wide row, the seeds are placed comparatively close together.

When using wide rows or raised beds, it is particularly important to pay close attention to the fertility of the soil. Plants growing so close together put a great demand on the soil and you have to make sure it can deliver all the nutrients that are required.

The tender plants like tomatoes, peppers and eggplant, should have been started indoors before now, but this is the time to start the hardier seeds that do not need such a long time to develop before being set out. The cole crops, broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage and cauliflower, can be started indoors and be hardened off and set outdoors in about a month. They not only can survive the cool weather, they also need it.

You can even get a head start with lettuce. Start seeds indoors and set seedlings outside at the same time you sow seeds directly in the garden.

If you have never gardened before, it is a good idea to check with your neighbors and see when they plant different crops. This will be a good guide.

After you have been gardening in the same spot for a couple of years you might want to make some adjustments in those planting dates. Maybe you'll find out that you're more of a gambler about frost dates or that you like setting out hardier varieties. Maybe you'll make use of a cold frame or those easily constructed plastic caterpillar tunnels and get a headstart on the season that way. Maybe you'll be like us and find out that just because of the particular location of your garden, you'll pick up a couple of frost-free weeks at the beginning and end of the season that your neighbors don't have.

Organize the tools and review the garden plan. Those spring breezes will be filling us with a new energy and invigoration. It's almost time to get out and GARDEN!