



Garden Tips: Preparing for the Season

Believe it or not, spring is just around the corner. And some cool season crops can be planted even before the official start of spring, in mid-March! So, it's time to think about getting garden beds ready for early season crops.

CONSIDER REMOVING MULCH

Mulch on the garden over the winter protects the soil and keeps it from eroding. If your layer of mulch is very thick and the ground below is frozen, removing the mulch will help the soil to warm up and dry out more quickly. Plan to remove mulch a few days before planting, if the forecast is for sunny days with no rain.

PULL BACK THICK MULCH AROUND BULBS

Even if you choose to leave the mulch layer intact, if you've planted bulbs like garlic, shallots, or flowers, check to make sure they aren't suffering. It's fine to leave a thin mat of mulch around the base of a sprouting bulb, but mulch that is very thick (4-6 inches or more) can stifle the plant's spring growth. You'll know there's too much mulch covering a plant if the new growth is thin, twisted, and pale. Simply remove some of the mulch to allow the plant to access sunlight.

TEST THE SOIL

If you are planting in the ground or raised beds and haven't already done a soil test, check the garden area to see if it is frozen. If so, wait for a few mostly sunny days, with temps above freezing and check again. When you can dig down several inches, collect soil samples from the garden area. You'll want to send in separate samples for areas that are significantly different from each other (for instance, bottom of a hill vs. top of a hill, area that tends to be wet and soggy vs. a dry and rocky area). Bring the soil inside and spread it out on newspaper. When it is completely dry, send it to a lab to be tested. We recommend working with the [University of Massachusetts](#) for initial testing, as it's a very affordable option. If heavy metals come back high, send another sample to [Penn State University](#) to confirm the exact amount in the soil.

AMEND YOUR SOIL

Based on soil test results, you may need to add certain amendments (some examples include: rock phosphate, greensand, and blood meal) to the soil for optimal plant growth. You can incorporate these in a few weeks when you're planting, or prepare the soil now and plant later. For containers, plan to remove about a quarter to one-third of the potting mix and refresh what's left of the old mix with compost. For raised beds or in-ground gardens, if you haven't done a soil test and want to revitalize your soil, add compost!

PLAN SPRING CROPS

There are many crops you can seed directly in your garden in a couple of weeks. Folk lore states that peas can go in the ground on St. Patrick's Day, and we often seed lettuce, mesclun greens, cooking greens, radishes, scallions, and turnips around the same time. Most of these crops will have produced their last by the time you'll want to plant summer crops like tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and zucchini. So they make a great first step for **succession** plantings – where one crop follows another one in the same spot.

Check out our archived article “First Crops to Seed Outdoors” to learn the nitty-gritty of planting the first few crops of the season!