Spring garden tilling

Source: Ray Tackett, UK extension horticulture agent

Home gardeners might be experiencing “spring fever” with the warmer temperatures and in a rush to do spring tilling. But keep in mind, the ground is still wet from a recent snowfall and a lot of rain. Don’t till the ground too early and potentially damage the very structure of your garden soil that could last for years to come.

Tilling your garden while it is still wet can destroy valuable soil structure. Soil structure describes the arrangement of the solid parts of the soil and the pore space located between them. Once that soil structure has been destroyed, it is not easily re-established. The pore spacing is critical for overall plant health and root development. Soil that has been tilled when wet will often form soil “clods” that can give you problems later on and can be difficult to deal with. In addition, foot traffic on wet soil can do as much damage in some cases as tilling when the soil is wet.

Also, if your soil contains even a moderate amount of clay, tilling with the right moisture content is even more important. One way to do a moisture check is a quick “squeeze test” to determine if you can till the soil. Take a handful of soil and squeeze it into a ball in your hand. If pressure from your fingertips causes the ball to crumble, the soil content should be good for tilling. Another option is to drop the soil ball from about waist high. As you might expect, if the ball shatters when dropped, it may be dry enough to work the soil without destroying the structure.

If you plan on adding soil amendments such as compost, it is good to work those into your soil early in the season. Be sure to blend any amendments thoroughly into the soil with a shovel or spading fork. Hand mixing in smaller areas is sometimes a better option than tilling compost into the soil with a rototiller. These warm, sunny spring days can be the best opportunity to work the compost into your soil. It’s important to remember that compost that has been sitting on top of your garden as a mulch has been insulating the soil too. The insulation effect can keep the soil from warming up and drying out. Mixing that compost into the soil will help speed up the warming process and could allow you to get plants into the ground sooner.

Contact (YOUR COUNTY) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service for information on spring garden tilling.

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