

Taking time in spring to build fertility, loosen soil and plan, will set you up for a more productive gardening year.

First, a few weeks before you plant, work in any cover crops. Remove rogue seedlings. You may think you are getting a freebie plant, but the new seedling could also carry over diseases from the previous season. Blanket your plot with at least a half-inch layer of good compost — a full inch would be even better. The compost will provide the soil with a fresh infusion of nutrient-rich organic matter, and improve the soil's ability to handle water and nourish your crops.

Second, cultivate your soil. Pounding rain, gravity and other forces cause soil to become compacted over time,

so loosen it before planting. Turn the soil when it's dry and crumbly (never when it's wet and clumpy, or you'll be stuck with big, brick-like clods). Use a "low tillage" technique whenever possible, as this will prevent soil erosion and protect worm habitat. However, for deep-root vegetables like carrots and parsnips, you'll have to dig and turn deeply. Use a broadfork to break up the soil. Finish the job with a rake to even the surface. This will prime your soil for planting by helping it dry out and warm up, and permit roots to penetrate the soil more easily.

Thirdly, apply an organic fertilizer to the degree that matches the needs of the crops you plan to plant. Light feeders with shallow roots, such

as lettuce, will be fine with a small amount of organic fertilizer raked into the top few inches of soil. But for widely spaced plants that have big nutrient appetites, such as cabbage, broccoli, tomatoes and peppers, you should enrich individual planting holes with a mixture of compost and organic fertilizer just before you set out seedlings.

Finally, plan the location of plants using **companion planting**. This is the planting of different crops in proximity for pest control, pollination, providing habitat for beneficial creatures, maximizing use of space, and to otherwise increase crop productivity.