

Can You Dig It?

By Schann Nelson
OSU Master Gardener



Oh my goodness gosh golly gee willickers! I thought that sunny weekend had lots blooming up here in our valley, but a brief journey into Orenco had me positively astonished! Everything is in bloom down there. And since that section of Hillsboro is professionally landscaped, there are spring flowering trees selected for that purpose everywhere. The road to the Max station in Orenco was a nasty muddy construction mess a year ago. Now it's a residential street in bloom. What a wonderful change.

Well it's not exactly winter here anymore, either. I surely do hope you had a chance, like I did, to sit and soak up the sun since we may not see it again for weeks. When the wind kicks in it still feels like winter, but temperatures are slowly rising. If you can't tell, the plants around us certainly can. Last month it seemed like deep winter would never end and nothing would ever come back to life. While daffodils were appearing in the valley, ours were trying hard to simply emerge from the ground – much less bloom.

Now, just a few short weeks later, the daffodils are in full bloom, the daylilies are a foot high, and the lilac buds are beginning to swell. You could practically watch things grow on those first few sunny days. Now we have settled in to our normal cold, wet, 'spring' weather. Don't get too excited about hot weather yet. It will get warmer and stop freezing every clear night, but the cloud cover and damp usually last well into May or June. It's not unusual for the ground to be too wet to sit on to watch fireworks on Independence Day.

Note on lilac buds: There is a folk saying about planting corn when the lilac buds are the size of a mouse's ear. While this may work where the change from deep winter to warm sunny weather is short and complete, all you will get for your effort planting corn seed (or squash, cucumbers or even beans) now – is the opportunity to RE-plant after nothing comes up. It takes much longer for the soil to warm up sufficiently to encourage growth that is strong enough and fast enough to defeat the ever-present rotting wetness. Replanting is a waste of time, effort and money.

Lots of storm damage clean up still needs to be done. Every good stiff breeze seems to bring more of the hanging broken stuff down out of the trees, which is a good thing. I'm expecting more trees to come down across highways and roads as trees begin to leaf out and gain mass and before the soil dries out and becomes more stable. There are a LOT of leaners and partially broken trees that don't look like it will take much to bring them down.

There are several ways to warm soil but all require additional effort. The easiest is probably floating row covers, sold as Frost Blankets. This lightweight material can stay in place as it allows moisture and light through. It's also very effective for keeping cats out of your freshly raked and seeded garden and will keep a variety of insect pests at bay. I'd rather have the bugs and be able to see my garden than just look at long rows of white. Slugs think you created a little damp shade just for them and can devastate young seedlings, so be sure to use vigorous control underneath row covers.

Large areas of soil can be warmed by covering the soil with either black or clear plastic before working the soil. Clear plastic will heat the ground more, but you will get a lovely crop of weeds to deal with. This may not be a bad thing if you are reducing the number of weed seeds. Sometimes clear plastic is suggested to "sterilize" soil before planting, but we have too much moisture and too little sun for this to be effective until high summer. I'm not convinced it's a good idea, either, because it also kills off beneficial soil organisms like worms and mushrooms. You could end up with hard, dry dirt that required a lot of rototilling and amendment with organic material to produce a quality growing environment.

I am not a fan of rototilling (partly because the operation of a tiller is beyond my capacity), but you can work up a large area in a relatively short amount of time. However, if you continue to rototill the same garden area you can create a hard compacted barrier at the depth of the tiller. This will prevent or inhibit plant growth below that depth. Water, nutrients, and beneficial organisms will have a hard time penetrating this hardpan. Since our topsoil is generally shallow and sits on top of a hard layer of clay, you don't need to add to the problem.

Plastic hot caps or tunnels work great and will warm soil significantly and keep that heat in BUT you absolutely must open the ends of the tunnel or tip the hot cap when the sun comes out or it

will get way too hot and scorch everything you've worked so hard to grow. This is not easy to do when the weather is so changeable. If the sun comes out while you're in the valley – not good.

Other stuff you can do now:

If you have good sun exposure and well-drained soil, you can start planting the following as soon as the soil warms consistently above freezing: broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, lettuce, endive, peas, Asian greens.

Incorporate organic matter into the soil along with other amendments, as indicated by soil testing, if you can work the ground at all.

Fertilize the lawn now and consider overseeding bare or sparse lawn – turns out that grass developed for lawns is MUCH better looking, darker and greener, than the lawn you get when you just mow the yard.

Plant hardy alyssum, phlox and marigold transplants. Hardy gladioli can be set in the ground.

Control fungal diseases such as black spot as needed, and prune for good air circulation.

Bait for slugs!

If you have never had a garden it's never too late to start growing something to supplement your food supply or beautify your surroundings. You can grow a nice crop of lettuce on a porch or deck in pots. Herbs also work well in pots. I'm especially fond of thyme because it makes a small draping shrub that lasts for years. And you can just prune and shape it a bit for seasoning a soup or a chicken. Select your site carefully: you need at least six hours of sun to get a vegetable crop, more for the sun lovers (tomatoes, corn, eggplant, melons, etc.). Be sure you put your plants where you can see and enjoy them! Don't even think about planting any of these heat lovers before mid-May at the earliest. Be sure to choose a short season variety and your sunniest location. Good Luck!

Watch for yellow jackets consistently returning to the same place. Those big slow-moving queens are looking for cracks, crannies and undisturbed (but loose and light) soil to start their families. If you find the entrance to a nest early, it's fairly easy to get rid of a whole colony by spraying. The best time of day to do this is early in the morning before the wasps are out. Be sure to seal the entrance hole if at all possible. Sprays do not kill larvae still in the nest so you may have treat several times as the survivors may clean out the nest and continue merrily along. They can be quite persistent in places like window sashes and behind exterior wall trim.

Don't forget! Spring Garden Fair, April 25, 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., St. Helens High School commons. Free parking! Free Admission! Great deals inside and out from local vendors of trees, shrubs, garden art, herbs, containers, etc. Raffle tickets for \$1.00. Tomatoes, 6,000 of them in 50 varieties for only \$1.25 per plant!

Is it Spring, yet?

Church Directory

NEHALEM VALLEY BIBLE CHURCH

Gary Taylor, Pastor
Grant & North Streets, Vernonia
503 429-5378
Sunday School 10:00 a.m.
Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.
Nursery available
Wednesday Service 7:00 p.m.

VERNONIA FOURSQUARE CHURCH

Carl Pense, Pastor
850 Madison Avenue, Vernonia
503 429-1103
Sunday Worship Service: 10:30 a.m.
Children's Sunday School

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS

Marc Farmer, Branch President
1350 E. Knott Street, Vernonia
503 429-7151
Sacrament Meeting, Sunday 10 a.m.
Sunday School & Primary 11:20 a.m.
Relief Society, Priesthood and
Young Women, Sunday 12:10 p.m.

SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST

Gary S. Walter, Pastor
2nd Ave. and Nehalem St., Vernonia
503 429-8301
Morning Worship, 11:00 a.m.
Sabbath School 9:30 a.m.

ASSEMBLY OF GOD

Wayne and Maureen Marr
662 Jefferson Ave., Vernonia,
503 429-0373
Sunday School 9:45 a.m.
Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.

VERNONIA CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Sam Hough, Evangelist
410 North Street, Vernonia
503 429-6522
Sunday School 9:45 a.m.
Morning Worship 11:00 a.m.
Every Wednesday:
Ladies' Bible Study 9:30 a.m.
Ladies' Worship 10:00 a.m.
Children's Choir 3:00 p.m.
Family Bible Study 7:00 p.m.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

359 "A" Street, Vernonia
503 429-4027
Sunday School 9:45 a.m.
Sunday Worship Service 11:00 a.m.
Wednesday Prayer Meeting 7:00 p.m.

ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

Rev. Luan Tran, Administrator
960 Missouri Avenue, Vernonia
503 429-8841
Mass Sunday 12:00 Noon
Religious Educ. Sunday 10:30 a.m.

VERNONIA COMMUNITY CHURCH

Grant Williams, Pastor
957 State Avenue, Vernonia
503 429-6790
Sunday Breakfast 9:00 a.m.
Morning Worship 9:45 a.m.
Children and Nursery 10:00 a.m.
Youth Group 6:00 p.m.
Preschool Mon. & Wed. 9:00 a.m.
Wednesday Prayer 6:00 p.m.
Tues. & Fri. Adult Volleyball 7:00 p.m.