

"Seasonal Clean-up"

You hear the term "spring cleaning" more often than "fall cleaning" but I expect we humans are equally spurred by both equinoxes to toss out the old bones? The crossing of the celestial equator by the sun twice a year may have prompted our primitive ancestors to make preparations for a new season, don't you think? I must admit the impulse to clean the garage occurs in March and September but if ignored it fades until a critical mass of misplaced items demands action. Outside work is more fun!

Once your last green tomato is tucked away to ripen on its own, it is time to tidy-up the vegetable garden. There will be bad bugs along with the good ones in the debris left behind by your crops, so a cleanup is essential. Clean and store the teepees, stakes, and cages for another year, rake away decaying vegetation and pull out any remaining roots.

If you don't have a tiller to work a cover crop into the soil come spring, you can spread a few inches of homemade compost and cover it with straw. You don't want any of your good soil to blow or wash away. If your garden plot is comfortably out of sight and your compost does not heat up sufficiently to kill the weed seeds, you might want to peg black plastic down over the surface. Not a solution featured in garden design but it is reassuring to think of all the healthy decomposing taking place under the black shroud.

About leaves- never, never give them away! Run a lawnmower over your assembled leaves to reduce their volume before adding them to your compost pile. Actually, they can be added to the compost you are spreading over your garden.

I have heard tell of filling big black trash bags with leaves and garden waste, piling them in a hidden corner and letting them cook for several months before pouring out what crumbles like chocolate cake. It does sound too simple to be successful and I haven't spoken to anyone who shook out rich black compost. I would like to.

POSSIBILITIES

Grafting vegetables is a new wrinkle in efforts to raise healthier crops. Strange as it may seem, growers in places as diverse as Holland, Japan, and Israel are grafting tomatoes on heirloom tomato rootstock. Research has shown that grafting can combine the disease resistance and vigor of modern hybrids with the high quality and taste of the older varieties. 'Johnny's Selected Seeds' catalog has seeds for 'Maxifort' rootstock if you would like to experiment.

Evidently the increase in yield justifies the time spent in grafting. Melons, too, profit from the process as it helps avoid the soil borne fungus diseases that often plague them.

In Japan where a preponderance of several vegetables are grafted research has shown that if a dilute solution of Vitamin C is sprayed on sweet pepper plants, the grafts are twice as successful. However, there was no mention in the article about the percentage of successful grafts in the first place. What a neat project for a scout troop- more functional than all those knots?

AH, ETHANOL

Have you noticed that a few of the Cassandras who deplored the launching of the effort to turn corn into fuel are squeaking, "Told you so!" In Europe, what was to have been an effort to meet 10% of its transportation fuel needs with biofuels by 2020, is being discussed as needing a more realistic timetable due.