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Spring's Wet Soils Require Gentle Treatment

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"Frozen, flattened and forlorn." Those are the words a friend used recently to describe his soil. The frost may have ebbed, but the winter's outrageous snowiness took its toll on gardens. Spring crops are tricky enough in a region where hot weather can arrive early, so it's frustrating to have planting delayed. My poor friend's yard was so soggy that he couldn't even haul away the storm-felled branches that littered it. The word to describe his state of mind was "glum."

He was right not to go tromping through the muck. Nothing is worse for wet soil that to step on it, till it, dig it or disturb it in any way. So even though you'd love to give it some TLC in the form of nice, fluffy peat moss or compost to lighten its heavy load, you can't do that until it dries out. The clay soil for which the area is famous will just clump up, sealing off the crevices and worm tunnels that are its best hope for fast draining. Yours is too wet to work if a handful of it, squeezed, oozes moisture.

Meanwhile, busy yourself with spring cleanup as best you can. For areas where it is necessary to step, you can lay down wide boards or pieces of plywood to distribute your weight and spare the soil some degree of compaction.

If a bed is more or less ready to go, it is not too late to plant a crop of early peas in it. Mark a row with string, then just poke your finger along it, making one-inch-deep holes two inches apart and dropping the pea seeds into them. Flick in a bit of soil to cover. If you haven't been able to erect a pea trellis, choose a bush variety. Or build a long planting box with a trellis attached to it, and grow them as a container crop. For spring lettuce, scatter a layer of mature, sifted compost in an inch-deep layer, sow your seeds in that and mulch the bed later on so that the compost doesn't dry out.

Perhaps the best use of your time is to assess the terrain for a late fall fix. Vow to add more organic matter after the last crops have been pulled out. First, incorporate as much homemade compost as you can make. This plan is your best hope of going into next spring with soil that will bounce back quickly. After you have tilled or raked in these amendments, spread a thin layer of straw that you will later rake off in spring.

They always say that spring is the season of promise, and so we're all eager to get out there and put in the garden. But where soil is concerned, fall is the time do the work. Make that a promise to keep.

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