

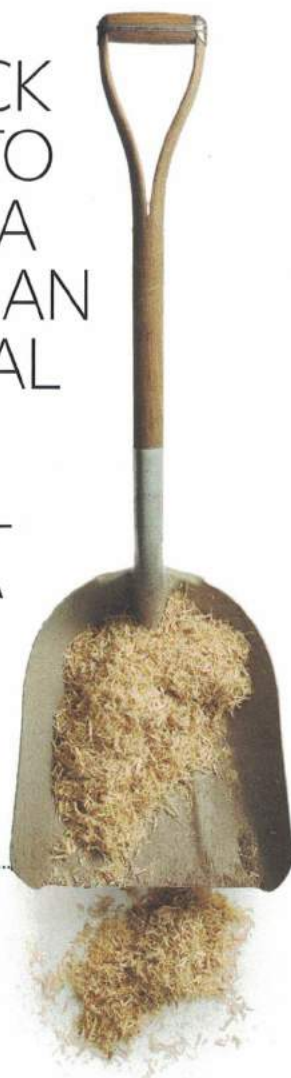


Prep Your Acreage For Spring

Shake off Old Man Winter and get your rural property in shape for growing season with these quick tips and techniques for maintenance, planting, and animal care.

Written by **Deborah R. Huso** | Photography by **Marty Baldwin**

CHANGE LIVESTOCK BEDDING OFTEN TO REDUCE BACTERIA BUILDUP. OPT FOR AN ORGANIC MATERIAL THAT ABSORBS MOISTURE WELL AND STORE EXTRA BEDDING IN A DRY PLACE TO KEEP IT FREE OF MOLD.



To Till or Not to Till. Tilling is critical if you have compact soil. But tilling can increase your soil's vulnerability to erosion and nutrient loss. If you till, make sure your equipment gets through the lowest layer, which helps decrease soil compaction so you don't have to till routinely.



Spring Checklist

Here's a rundown of what should be on your spring to-do list.

LOOK FOR MAINTENANCE ISSUES.

Check roofs that may have been damaged by wind or snow. Look for signs of moisture infiltration in buildings, like stains or mold on the rafters. Check fences for damage from wind, snow, and wildlife.

PREP PASTURES.

The best time to seed is in fall, but you can do it in early spring if you missed the autumn window. You can even do frost seeding (spreading seed on frozen ground) if you use seeds that germinate in cold weather. Let your grass grow before you let animals graze, so the root systems take hold and thrive. The grass should be taller than the hooves of your animals before grazing begins.

INSPECT LIVESTOCK SHELTERS.

Pay particular attention to ventilation. Does the shelter smell musty? Is air circulating? If not, consider leaving two doors open so air can get in and out. Once you let your animals out for spring grazing, be sure to muck shelters thoroughly, too.

CHECK ANIMAL HEALTH.

Look for respiratory distress or nose discharge. Check hoof health, especially in spring when animals may spend time in mud, which makes them vulnerable to foot rot. This is also a good time to make sure your animals' vaccinations are up-to-date.

PRUNE FRUIT TREES.

Apple, pear, peach, and plum trees can be pruned if they're still dormant. Prune grapevines in early spring if you didn't do it in winter.

START A GARDEN JOURNAL.

Write down the varieties of produce and berries you grow. Throughout the year, make notes about pests or diseases and how your varieties perform, so you have that information on hand when you plan the next year's garden.

CATCH UP ON BOOKKEEPING.

Set up a filing system for the coming season's receipts and invoices. File taxes and renegotiate contract terms if you rent out land or lease land from someone else.

PREP YOUR GREENHOUSE.

Check ventilation systems, reduce daily grow-light times, and clean out insects that may have overwintered in your greenhouse so they don't infect your plants.

CHECK OUT YOUR DRIVEWAY.

If you've plowed snow during winter, your driveway (unless it's paved) likely needs attention. Rake displaced gravel back onto the driveway, check for potholes, and make sure you still have proper drainage into ditches.

WATER WISE

Use these handy tools to simplify watering chores.

CUSTOM COVERAGE

Use the on/off switch on Gilmour's new Circular Sprinkler (\$15), right, to easily adjust the coverage area (or set the spray to 360 degrees). gilmour.com

A NEW SPIN

Dramm's ColorStorm Spinning Sprinkler (\$19.50), far right, works great with low-pressure well water systems—and adds a pop of fun color. amazon.com

EASY TO MOVE

The lightweight Flexzilla SwivelGrip Garden Hose (\$50), right, is easy to coil and maneuver around trees—and the innovative fitting makes connecting it to a spigot a snap. flexzilla.com



Install Fences. If you need to dig holes for new fence posts, wait until after a rain or spray the area with a garden hose to make it easier to get your posthole digger into the ground. If you have heavy clay soil, rent a gas-powered posthole digger or auger—it will make the job much easier. And remember to get your utilities marked before digging.

“WALK AROUND YOUR LAND AND BE OBSERVANT. YOU SHOULD BE DOING THIS FOUR TIMES A YEAR. LOOK FOR THINGS THAT NEED REPAIRS.”

—Emily Wilmes, University of Minnesota extension educator, ag production systems



Map out your garden space, so you know how many seeds and transplants to purchase. This will also help you plan crop rotations and succession plantings later in the year.



USE A STIFF BRUSH AND A MIXTURE OF DISH SOAP AND VINEGAR TO CLEAN GARDEN POTS BEFORE PLANTING.



Check your chicken coop. Confirm your birds, including new ones, have sufficient space and that outdoor runs or coops are not in the mud, which can be bad for bird health. (You may want to move your coops several times a year.)

Seven Musts for Tractor Maintenance

If you haven't used your garden tractor or ATV since fall, give equipment a maintenance checkup before putting it into spring service. Make start-up easier with these tips:

DRAIN FUEL from equipment before storing for winter, and start with new fuel in spring.

CHANGE AIR FILTERS. "A lot of times small rodents get in and make a nest outside the air filter, especially if the filter contains debris from the fall," says Andy Seibel, associate extension specialist with the Virginia Cooperative Extension at the Catawba Sustainability Center.

CHANGE THE OIL in machinery regularly. "The basic rule of thumb for a lawn tractor is to change the oil every 100 hours of operation; for a farm tractor, it's once a year," Seibel says.

GREASE FITTINGS AND SPINDLES every 25 hours for a farm tractor, every 15 for a lawn mower. Use the type of grease recommended by the manufacturer.

CHECK AIR PRESSURE in all your tires, and make sure they're properly inflated. Be careful not to overinflate. Seibel says you want the tires to float on the ground for traction.

SHARPEN MOWER BLADES or change them before using them in spring. If you take them to a shop for sharpening, get them balanced, too, to avoid vibrations when cutting grass.

CHOOSE FUEL WISELY. Consider using ethanol-free fuel in your equipment, for example. "It's more expensive," Seibel says, "but your engine will last longer." Ethanol burns hotter, and it also eats up the neoprene tubes and components in your machine.



Testing and Prepping Your Soil

Soil testing is critical to having a productive farm or garden. North Carolina Cooperative Extension agent Lisa Rayburn recommends testing soil every two to four years, less frequently for heavy or clay soils and more often for sandy soils. She also offers these tips:

OBTAIN MULTIPLE SAMPLES. "Your soil may vary from one part of your acreage to another," Rayburn says, so you may need to take several samples. "If the soil looks similar throughout a garden, you'll probably want to collect seven to 10 subsamples and mix them together in a clean plastic bucket. That will be your aggregate sample," she says.

GET IT TESTED. Your local county extension service can provide you with a list of labs that offer soil testing in your state. Make sure you follow the individual lab's instructions when you pull your sample. If you're bringing new soil into production, have that tested, too.

BOOST SOIL HEALTH. Once you receive your soil-sample report, apply fertilizer according to the lab's recommendations, which will be provided in terms of pounds or tons of nutrient per 1,000 square feet or per acre.

FOLLOW DIRECTIONS. "Often people buy the right fertilizer but don't pay attention to the right rate of application," Rayburn says. Measure your garden space and apply nutrients precisely as recommended. Add more fertilizer during the growing season if needed.

TIME IT RIGHT. Make sure you work your nutrients into the soil no more than a week or two before planting. Otherwise rain could wash away your nitrogen before you even start planting.

MIX IN COMPOST. If you fertilize with compost or organic matter, don't add more than 1 inch, and till it 8–10 inches deep into the soil.

CHECK SOIL PH. If you need to add lime to raise your soil's pH for optimal growing conditions, Rayburn suggests applying it six months before planting because it takes a while to work into the soil. That means no spring application unless it's on ground that will be fallow until fall.

TOUGH TOOLS

Weeding and pruning just got a little easier, thanks to these smart garden helpers.

WEED FIGHTER

The CobraHead Weeder and Cultivator (\$22–\$25), *right*, features a steel forged blade to easily cut through weed-choked beds. cobrahead.com

A CUT ABOVE

Trim branches up to 2 inches thick with Fiskars Forged Loppers (\$45), *far right*. Blades can be sharpened or replaced. fiskars.com



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