

Is it time yet?

by Peter Garnham

We are all anxious to get going in the garden, but starting too soon can lead to disappointment. Soil temperature is one consideration—some seeds and plants like cool soil, others hate it—but the first thing to check is soil moisture. If you dig garden soil before it has dried out after the winter, it will form hard clods that you'll be stuck with for the whole season. Don't do it!

Here's a quick-and-dirty (definitely dirty) test. Take a handful of soil. Close your hand around it and squeeze, hard. (I can hear all the "ooh, yuck!" comments—don't worry, it'll wash off.) If any water oozes out between your fingers, the soil is *definitely* much too wet to dig.

If not, open your hand. There is a lump of soil sitting in your palm. With the finger and thumb of the other hand, give it a pinch. If it is like Play-Doh, forget it, it's still too wet. You can double-check this by trying to make a soil sausage—roll the lump of soil between your hands. If you can make a sausage that holds together, the soil is definitely too wet.

When the day comes that the soil lump in your hand, after being squeezed, neither oozes water nor holds together like Play-Doh, you *might* be getting close. Give the lump of soil a good hard poke. If it crumbles and falls apart into several pieces . . . *yippee!* It's time to plant!

Soil temperature is critical for some plants, such as tomato, eggplant, and pepper. Planting them in cold soil shocks them and sets them back so much they may not recover. The soil (not the air, mind you, the *soil*) has to be a nice steady 60 degrees F. before you should put these plants in. Don't tell the cook, but a kitchen thermometer works just fine to measure soil temperature.

Seeds that do well in cool soil include lettuce, spinach, most of the Asian greens such as mizuna and tatsoi, arugula, and Swiss chard.