1998

Do Your Plants Have Cold Feet?

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electronic publishing

GARDEN NOTES

DO YOUR PLANTS HAVE COLD FEET?

By Dennis Hinkamp

July 1998 Summer-11

This wet, cool weather has left a chill in the soil that usually is gone by now. This has suppressed the growth of many garden plants.

Tomatoes, peppers, melons and cucumbers are especially affected by cold soil, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist.

"These plants like to have warm, toasty feet before they really take off and grow," Goodspeed says. "If the weather remains cool and wet, these plants, along with a few others, will struggle and complain. Often their leaves will even turn yellow. However, once the weather warms and the sun starts to heat up the soil, most garden plants will get down to business and grow like they should."

One thing that may help warm up your garden is removing any mulch from around the plants until the soil has warmed and the plants show signs of constant growth, he says. Normally, mulch in the garden is a great idea. However, if it is applied too early or before the soil has a chance to warm, it may act as an insulator, keeping the soil cooler than normal.

"If some plants have been in the ground for a few weeks and there is no growth, you may even need to consider getting new transplants and replacing them," Goodspeed says. "Some warm-loving vegetables go into shock and never really recover when they are planted in cold soils. They set a small fruit or two and fail to produce like they should."

Some seeds, such as sweet corn, even rot in the soil if it is too cold or wet, he says. Other seeds which may become infested with this tendency to rot include beans, cucumbers, melons and some squash. If the seeds have not germinated after three weeks or so, you may just have to plant some more.

Two pests that tend to thrive in this moist, cool weather like we've been having are slugs and snails, Goodspeed says. They feed and are most active at night or on overcast, rainy days and find cool, moist hiding places during sunny, hot days.

"Slugs and snails will eat about anything, which means they can cause a great deal of damage throughout the garden," he says

"The most important step towards reducing damage is to clean up slug and snail hideouts.

This includes boards, wood piles, weedy areas around tree trunks, dense ground covers, stones and overgrown areas. If the situation can't be eliminated, try to keep it as dry as possible and inspect it regularly for those hiding critters."

Another step is to remove them by hand, he says. Although a messy job, it can be effective. Water the garden in the evening, then after dark go slug and snail hunting. Use a flashlight and rubber gloves. Place the offenders in a plastic, sealable bag and dispose of them.

Another option is to set out boards in the garden in the evening, Goodspeed suggests. The next morning, turn the boards over to expose the hiding pests. Dispose of any who took cover under the nice, cool board. For those squeamish few, slugs and snails can also be effectively killed with a sprayed 50 percent solution of ammonium. Do not spray on plants though, because it can damage the foliage.

"Beer baits can also be used, but although rich in folklore are not always reliable," he says. "I guess not all slugs and snails are drinkers. Several types of barriers have proven effective when placed around the garden. A 6-inch high copper screen will last for several years. Diatomaceous earth in a three inch band is useful, but needs to be reapplied after a heavy watering. Ashes heaped one inch high and three inches wide has also proved to be effective, but again must be replaced every week or so."

"One important thing to remember when using physical barriers is to be certain the garden is first free of the slimy pests," Goodspeed says. "Fencing them out of the garden is great, but fencing them in can really be aggravating. It would be like casting Adam and Eve 'into' the Garden of Eden—not real effective."

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