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Let the Heat and the Drought Work For You

Dennis Hinkamp
Utah State University

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GARDEN NOTES

LET THE HEAT AND THE DROUGHT WORK FOR YOU

By Dennis Hinkamp

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The drought may be a good excuse to reduce or eliminate a garden this year, but it doesn't have to be a "wasted" year.

This would be an ideal time to solarize all or part of your garden area to "pasteurize" your soil, says Sherm Thomson, Utah State University Extension plant pathologist. This will allow you to start with a clean slate next year.

Solarization is the process of using clear plastic and solar energy to heat the soil to a point that pathogenic microorganisms, weed seeds and nematodes are killed, Thomson explains. The clear plastic traps the solar energy and elevates the soil temperature sufficiently to be lethal to many of the detrimental flora and fauna in the soil, but does not kill most of the beneficial microbes.

Use the following guidelines to accomplish solarization with only a small effort and big results:

1. Irrigate the area as if preparing to plant a garden.
2. Prepare the soil by tilling as if you were going to plant a garden. This removes any existing weeds and loosens up the soil.
3. Cover with clear plastic (2-6 ml thickness) and seal around the edges with a layer of soil.
4. Allow the sun to solarize the area for six weeks during the hot part of the summer: July and August.
5. Plant the garden next year in clean, pasteurized soil.

Weeds and other microbes will eventually re-invade the area, but it will take a few years, he says. Unfortunately, solarization will not kill deep-rooted perennial weeds such as Canada thistle and bindweed.

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