

Solarization : Baking out the Bad Guys

Let the sun's energy cook up some free and safe pest control in your resting garden this summer. Solarization is a non-chemical method of controlling many soil pests such as nematodes, insects and weeds. Imagine a fall garden with fewer weeds, wilts, root rots, and root nematodes, to name a few.

As soon as you've harvested your spring garden crop, try this economical and environmentally friendly procedure called Solarization. Cover the garden with clear plastic for 4 to 6 weeks during the summer to intensify the baking effect of the sun's rays. When the garden is prepared properly and the plastic is fitted closely to the soil, the temperatures can easily soar to 120 degrees or more in the top six inches. Bye-bye bugs and thugs.

Prepare the garden by tilling and leveling the soil as you would before planting. Work in your soil amendments such as animal manures and other organic materials. Smooth the soil, providing a slight slope so that water won't collect on top of the plastic after rain showers. Standing water slows the heating process below the plastic.

Thoroughly wet the soil to twelve inches deep just before you lay the plastic. Dig a trench around the area to be covered, tarp with plastic, lay the edges of the plastic in the trench, and fill in the trench with soil. Pull the plastic firmly as you bury the edges so that the plastic fits close to the soil. This keeps in the heat and keeps out the cooling wind.

The most effective plastic for solarizing is clear plastic, preferably at least 2 mils thick. Thicker tarps may last longer, but not as much energy is transmitted to the soil. Thin plastic, such as painters' drop cloths work well, but they will begin to deteriorate in 5 or 6 weeks. Cleaning up hundreds of little pieces of plastic can be a chore.

The garden will be ready for planting as soon as the plastic is removed and fewer new weed seeds will be brought to the surface. Now, let the sun cook up a great start to a fall garden.

For more gardening tips for North Florida, call the UF Master Gardeners at 752-5384 or visit the UF/IFAS website <http://solutionsforyourlife.com>. *(Published 6-24-12)*