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homemakers' chat

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U. S. DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1944

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QUESTION BOX

Use leftover seeds?
Ashes to lime garden?
How arrange garden rows?
How take sweet from potatoes?
How rebind blanket?

ANSWERS FROM scientists of U. S.
Department of Agriculture.

It's "mail call" time again, and today the letters are for gardening experts, potato specialists, and home economists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Let's begin with the gardening questions. Here's one from a homemaker who appreciates the importance of saving garden seed this year. She writes, "I have some vegetable seeds left over from last year. I've kept them in a dry, cool place. Do you think they may still be good?"

The gardening experts say you can make a simple test to determine if your leftover vegetable seed is still good. Moisten two paper towels. Place one in a pan...lay about a dozen to fifty seeds on it...and cover with the other moist towel and, over that, an inverted pan. Set the pans in a warm room for ten days, and keep the paper towels moist but not dripping during that time. Look at the seeds on the fifth, seventh, and tenth days. If they're still good, at least three-fourths of the seeds you're testing will have sprouted at the end of ten days, and it will be safe to use the seed in your garden.

Now here's our second gardening letter: "A friend has advised me to save the ashes from my fireplace and use them in place of lime in my garden this spring. Do ashes really take the place of lime as a garden fertilizer?"

According to the garden specialists, you can use hardwood ashes in place of lime, since the ashes left from burning hardwood contain some lime and as much as five percent potash. However, most garden vegetables do best on soil that's

slightly acid, and most fertile garden soil doesn't need lime. But if your soil does need lime, and if the soil is heavy, adding hardwood ashes will probably improve the fertility and help lighten up the soil.

The ashes from an ordinary fire place are usually enough to supply all the lime the average-size town garden needs. You can use up to fifty pounds on a garden thirty by sixty feet in size. During the winter, store your ashes where they'll keep dry, so the potash won't leach out. Apply the ashes when you prepare the seed bed in the spring, and make sure you mix them thoroughly with the soil.

Here's one more letter for the garden experts to answer. This letter says, "I'm planning the arrangement of my garden, and have a problem on which I'd like advice. I've been told the rows in a garden should run the long way of the plot. Is this always desirable? What about sloping gardens?"

If your garden slopes so that there's danger of erosion, run the rows across the slope, or on the contour. This helps hold rainfall, and keeps the soil from washing away. However, on a level garden plot it's usually more convenient to work with a wheel hoe, for example, if the rows run the long way of the garden.

In planning your garden, you might keep in mind that it's also convenient to group the perennial plants—rhubarb, asparagus, herbs, and the like— together at one side of the garden, so they'll be out of the way when you're spading or cultivating the section where you grow annual crops. Another pointer is to keep tall-growing crops on the north or west side of the garden if possible, so they won't shade the low-growing plants. Many gardeners like to put their small early vegetables along the south or east side, and then work across the garden as they plant progressively later crops. This avoids confusion, and damage to the early sowings.

Well, that takes care of our gardening questions for today, but we still have a couple more questions to answer. Here's one from a homemaker who's having potato trouble. She stored potatoes from her victory garden in the cellar. "Now",

she writes, "the potatoes have turned sweet. What caused this? Is there any way to get rid of that sweet taste?"

Your potatoes are probably stored in a temperature of 40 degrees or less, and as a result of the cold some of the starch in the potatoes has turned to sugar. This doesn't affect the food value of the potatoes, but of course it does affect the taste.

However, the potato specialists say you can restore the potatoes at least partially to their normal flavor, by keeping them for a week or two in a room where the temperature is between 60 and 70 degrees. The comparative warmth of this temperature will change part of the sugar back into starch, and take out most of the sweetness.

But if you keep them too long at this higher temperature, potatoes begin to sprout. So it's best to keep them in the cold storeroom and bring them into a warmer pantry or storage place only a week or two before you want to use them. That way you'll give them time enough to lose their sweet taste, but not time enough to begin sprouting.

And now we come to a question for the home economists. This letter says, "I have a wool blanket on which the binding is badly worn. What is the best way to refinish the edges?"

Well, the home economists suggest you might replace the worn binding with a new one. But be sure to shrink the new binding before you sew it on. Baste the binding in place, then double stitch it at the edge, and sew the ends of the binding.

If your blanket's old and worn, and not worth putting on a new binding, finish the edge with a blanket stitch. First rip off the old binding, then trim away any ravelings, straighten the blanket edge, and steam-press it. On a thick blanket, stitch the edge a couple of times on the machine-- once close to the edge, and once again about a quarter of an inch farther in. Then finish the edge with a blanket stitch. On lightweight blankets, baste in a narrow hem, then sew with the blanket stitch.

Speaking of blanket bindings-- you know rayon is much in demand for war uses now. As a result, rayon bindings on new blankets that are 95 percent or more cotton have now been discontinued, with the exception of crib blankets. And bindings on new wool blankets are limited to a total width of three inches-- which means one and a half inches on each side of the center fold, or about half the width of the bindings on pre-war blankets.

