homemakers' chat
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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

TUESDAY, March 3, 1942

QUESTION BOX
How test for dryness of soil?
Best "lay" for garden land
How deep to work soil
Right soil for tomatoes
Lime for garden vegetables?

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

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Questions up for answers today all come from gardeners--the kind of gardeners the country needs in this emergency year. All these gardeners are going to raise vegetables scientifically and take no chance on losing crops the country needs, and wasting seeds or fertilizer or spray materials, all so valuable this year. These patriotic gardeners understand that no one should try a garden this year without good soil, and enough water, sunshine, time and expert guidance for success. But anyone who can raise a good crop of vegetables should join the victory gardeners of 1942. The country needs a million 300 thousand more vegetable gardens this year--but all of these gardens must be successful.

Well, here are the questions from the mailbag followed by answers from plant scientists of the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

The first question is: "How can I tell when the ground is in condition to be worked in the spring?"

The answer is: Press a little soil in the palm of your hand. If the soil is too wet for working, it will stick together in a solid mass and hold the imprint of your hand. But if it is dry enough to work, it will crumble apart by itself. Usually sandy loam soils are dry enough to work at an earlier date than stiff clay loams. (But clay loams have the advantage of withstanding dry weather better than sandy loams.) You never gain anything by getting too enthusiastic and starting to work the ground before it's ready; in fact, you can injure the ground for the whole season that way. Wait until that handful of soil crumbles in your hand before you

get out your spade or hoe.

Now for a second question. A gardener wants to know how much the "lay of the land" has to do with the success of a garden.

Plant scientists say: Good location is very important to the success of a garden. They say a garden must have well-drained soil. So never choose a low, damp place where water is likely to stand, and where frost settles. And never choose too steep a slope where rains will wash the soil. The ideal "lay" for a garden is level ground, or a gentle slope toward the south or southeast. A gentle slope to the south or southeast is the safest for early crops because it is warmest.

Question No. 3 is about preparing the soil. Here's what the letter says: "I spaded our garden patch last fall. How much working does it need this spring?"

Plant scientists say ground that was plowed or spaded last fall needs to be worked to a depth of 4 or 5 inches this spring. You can prepare it by harrowing, raking, hoeing or forking. The more thoroughly you work it, the better results you are likely to have, and the more time and labor you save. Land not plowed or spaded last fall, will need it this spring, followed by harrowing, raking or hoeing.

Now for a question about one of the most important crops for any victory garden, tomatoes. Tomatoes are especially valuable for their vitamin C. Every up-to-date gardener knows that. And every housewife knows they are the easiest of all vegetables to can. Tomatoes will thrive in any part of the country provided they have the right soil, and moisture, and sunshine. And once the plants start bearing, they keep on until the end of their season.

The letter here says: "What kind of soil is best for tomato plants?"

Plant scientists answer: Tomatoes will grow on any fertile, well-drained garden soil. They aren't as fussy about soil as some garden crops. Prepare the soil for tomatoes by one liberal application of manure, and also one application of

commercial fertilizer, if you have it. Don't use too much of any fertilizer that is heavy in nitrogen--poultry manure, for example--because that makes the plant go to vine instead of setting fruits.

Tomatoes are tropical plants by origin so are very sensitive to cold. So you can't set the plants out in the garden until all danger of frost is past. That's why gardeners in all parts of the country except the far South start tomato plants indoors about this time of year, or buy plants ready-started.

Now here's a question about using lime in the garden. The letter asks: "Do most garden vegetables benefit if lime is used on the soil?"

Plant scientists say: No. Most garden vegetables do best on soils that are slightly acid, and lime, of course, is alkaline. However, asparagus, celery, beets, spinach and sometimes carrots benefit from a moderate use of lime, especially if the soil is naturally low in lime, or if the soil is heavy. But you can injure vegetables by using a little too much lime. For safety, never use it unless you have tested the soil and know that it needs lime. Plant scientists say that garden soil with good drainage and plenty of manure is right for most vegetables with no lime added.

Last question: "Where can I get information on growing a war garden or victory garden?"

Answer: Write to the U. S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., for the new publication called "Victory Gardens." This publication called "Victory Gardens" is free. Write for yours now so you'll have the information on hand when garden weather arrives.

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