

How To Prepare The Rows Before Planting

Wednesday, July 9, 2008

Hilling the rows helps the plants to grow. By throwing dirt up on the base of the plant, small weeds are smothered and soil moisture is conserved. The ridge also holds the stalk upright so it doesn't bend or blow over with the weight of the crop.

Not all rows get ridged, though. Interestingly, it's the new world crops that like to be hilled: potatoes, corn, beans, and squash. We also hill up our peppers, they tend to break when a wind blows hard and they're full of fruit.

As our crop grows, we continually hoe and cultivate it. Weeds are not welcome in our garden, and the soil is kept loose and friable. I want to be able to run my fingers easily through the earth. Then I know the roots can too.

Eventually the plants get too tall to cultivate, and the roots would be damaged by further cultivation. Right before this pint is when we put the hillers on. They are used on the last pass through the rows with the tractor.

The hiller is a disc that rotates as the tractor moves over the row. They fit on the back and are held on by the same primitive, case iron pieces that the regular cultivators are attached with. I love old farm equipment with implicitly I can understand.

I move through the potatoes slowly. Behind me, the hillers spin and pull the loose soil up around the base of the plants. This hill smothers any weeds that are there, and it is where the potatoes will form.

Though the corn patch I hill in 2nd gear. Going faster throws more dirt up, which will keep the plant from blowing over. Corn grows upright, not sprawling like the potatoes, so I can get by with more speed. But a mistake takes out more plants, so I have to be careful.

When the green beans start producing, they fall over and the beans touching the soil will start to rot. Hilling the beans makes them make more than just a hill of beans. I have to go in 1st gear again for the bean rows, slow and steady. Looking back while moving often gets me off the row, it's best to put the clutch in, then look back and check that everything is alright.

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Just before squash or pumpkins start to run, they stand up a little seeking the sun. That's when we can hill them. Small plants will get smothered, and vining ones will get broken, so timing is critical. But the hiller saves us one time through with the hoes, and hoeing is our most laborious task this time of year.

Hilling is kind of like mulching, but with dry soil rather than hay. Loose, dry dirt holds the moisture in underneath it. Bean and squash have tap roots that dig deep for moisture, and will make decent crops without much rain.

The sweet potato patch is hilled before it's planted. We use the hillers to throw up a ridge, and plant the slips in the top. They love dry weather and once established really grow fast with no rain. Sweet potatoes can find soil moisture with their long roots and when their vines touch the soil, they send out more roots. Both squash and sweet potatoes have leaves that wilt during the heat of the day, and then revive precious moisture. As I cultivate them, the ridge falls down, taking little weeds with it. I hill them again for the last cultivation.

After hilling, the crop is said to be, laid by. This means harvesting is all that's left to do. Our crop has the field and the weeds are smothered out. It's a beautiful sight. These simple discs spinning through the loose soil throw up a ridge that supports the plants, conserves moisture, and let's us hang up the hoes a little sooner.