

What to do
THIS WEEK
On your fruit & veg plot

Mulch veg beds

Boost soil for future crops

MANY gardeners on heavy clay soils dig over their plots in early winter, leaving the earth in great clumps to allow frosts to penetrate and break up the structure. After a frost or two, you can move onto the next step in your soil preparation: adding a thick layer of mulch.

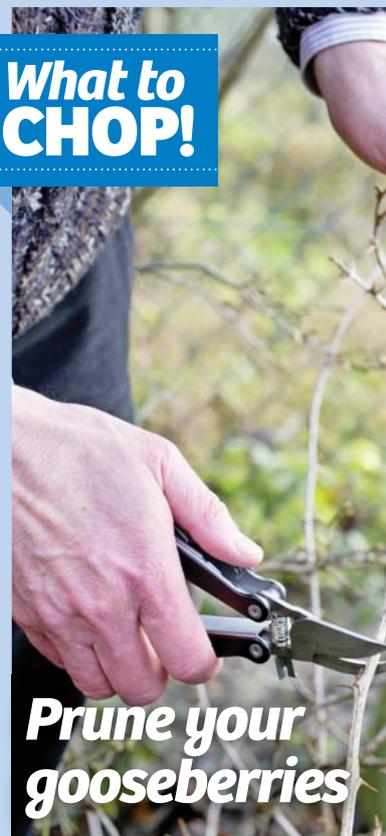
A mulch of organic matter such as well-rotted garden compost acts as a cushion to protect the soil from compaction and erosion. It is rich in humus, which helps the structure of all types of soil. You could also opt for well-rotted manure as a mulch, but avoid this richer stuff if you are planning to grow root veg, which can fork in very fertile soils.



Remove dead veg foliage

The leaves at the base of brassicas such as kale, winter cabbage and broccoli can naturally yellow and die off during the winter. Dying leaves become an entry point for diseases and rot, so employ good hygiene and remove them from the plant promptly. Don't leave them lying on the soil around your crop – add them to your compost heap.

What to CHOP!



Prune your gooseberries

Winter prune gooseberries to maintain an open framework that allows light and air into the centre, to encourage new growth, and to maintain the supply of two to three year old fruiting wood. Remove any growth from the short main stem at the base of the bush to keep it clear, cut out dead or damaged stems and any that are crossing and rubbing or crowding the centre, to make an open-centred framework. Try to remove the oldest stems first. Lastly, shorten last year's new growth by half at the tips.

Geoff Hodge tests border forks to easily work over the soil

BEST BORDER FORK

Joseph Bentley Stainless Steel Border Fork
£29.99

The longest (79cm/31½in) shaft and one of the lightest tested. It has pointed, strong, polished stainless steel tines and ash shaft with Y-shaped handle. The head is 23cm (9in) long and 14cm (5½in) wide. It was very easy and comfortable to use and worked through the soil with ease. Supplier: 01905 791984, www.josephbentley.org.uk



BEST FOR COMFORT

Spear & Jackson Select Stainless Steel Border Fork
£28.49

A 75cm (29½in) long ergonomically-shaped polypropylene plastic shaft holds stainless steel tines. The head size is the same as the Joseph Bentley fork. The shaft and rounded 'D' handle have rubberised grips, making it comfy to use and less likely to slip in the wet. Supplier: 0114 281 4242, www.spear-and-jackson.com



BEST SOFT GRIP

Yeoman Stainless Steel Border Fork
£24.99

The Yeoman fork has the same stainless steel head as the Joseph Bentley and quite a long (73cm/28¾in) shaft, the upper section made from ash. The ergonomically-designed plastic D handle has a soft plastic finger-shaped grip, making it comfy to use – even after long periods. Supplier: 01905 791984, www.yeomangarden.com

