

your *garden*

Get a jump on your spring gardening chores by starting in the fall

Why not shorten your list of spring gardening chores by doing some of them in the fall?

Cleaning the garden and preparing the soil now will help you have a healthy vegetable garden next year.

First of all, harvest the last of your tender vegetables -- tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and cucumbers. Leave the hardier vegetables such as parsnips, cabbage and Brussels sprouts but protect them from the cold with mulch, clear plastic over frames, or cold frames made from recycled windows.

Remove decaying plants and plant litter to the compost. This will eliminate overwintering sites for insects and disease. Inspect the roots of the plants you remove for signs of problems underground such as nematodes. These tiny roundworms feed and lay eggs on the roots of plants. They cause all kinds of problems including malformation of plants, die back and root knots. You can try methods such as crop rotation and companion planting to control them when you plant your garden the following year.

Turn your garden over where there are no remaining plants. This can reduce pest problems for the next year by interrupting the life cycle of the insects in the ground. Eggs, grubs and pupae die when exposed to



cold or left in the open as food for hungry birds.

Tilling also helps break up the rough soil of a new garden. Winter's freezes and thaws will further crush these churned up chunks.

Add organic matter to your garden. Organic matter or humus -- if you prefer -- includes manure, leaves and kitchen waste. For a truly fertile vegetable garden, try to add several inches of humus. Since organic

matter takes months to break down, the ideal time to add it to your soil is fall.

Helping along the way are all sorts of beetles, worms, fungus and bacteria. Seen or unseen, they are working away to improve your soil.

The cold winter and spring thaw also helps in decomposition. This natural process of decay and digestion does several things for your garden soil. Mineral nutri-

ents are restored and micro-organism growth is spurred on, which helps dissolve the mineral nutrients for better absorption by plants. Soil texture is also improved, making it easier to work with and enabling it to hold moisture.

One thing you can easily do to help your garden comes when you are raking fall leaves. Instead putting out with the garbage, make a pile, run over them with your lawnmower and then put them in your garden.

Fall is also an excellent time to start a cover crop. Though it is usually grown most frequently on large farms, a cover crop also has value for the small gardener.

A cover crop can work as a fertilizer. Roots of nitrogen-fixing cover crops or legumes -- such as berseem clover and hairy vetch -- are colonized by bacteria that pull nitrogen right out of the air.

When you till these plants into your garden they add much-needed nitrogen to your soil. Grass cover crops -- which include wheat, oats and rye -- also supply some nitrogen to the garden. Although they don't collect it from the air, it is supplied when the grasses break down in the garden.

The two main benefits are the addition of organic matter to the garden and thick, fibrous, shallow root systems which are good for breaking up hard-packed soil.

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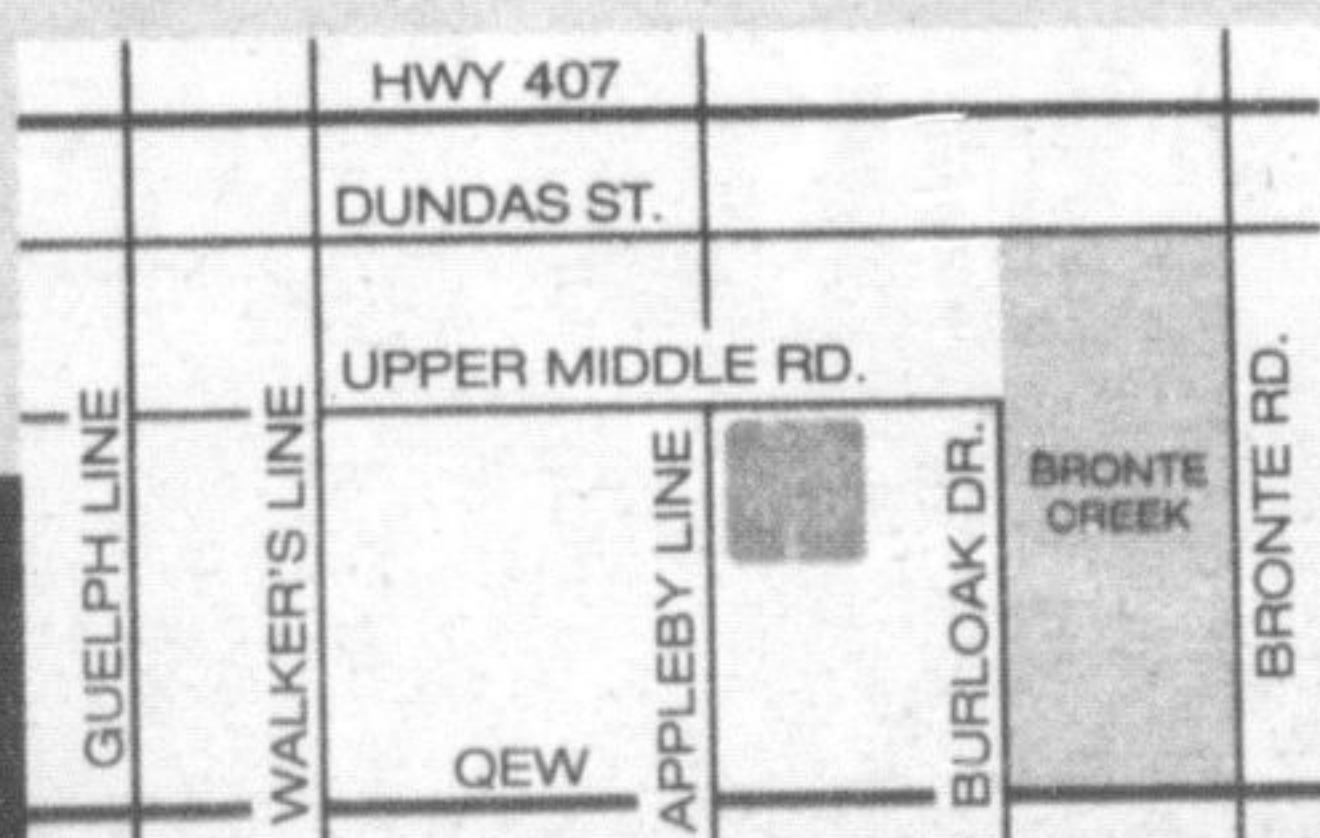
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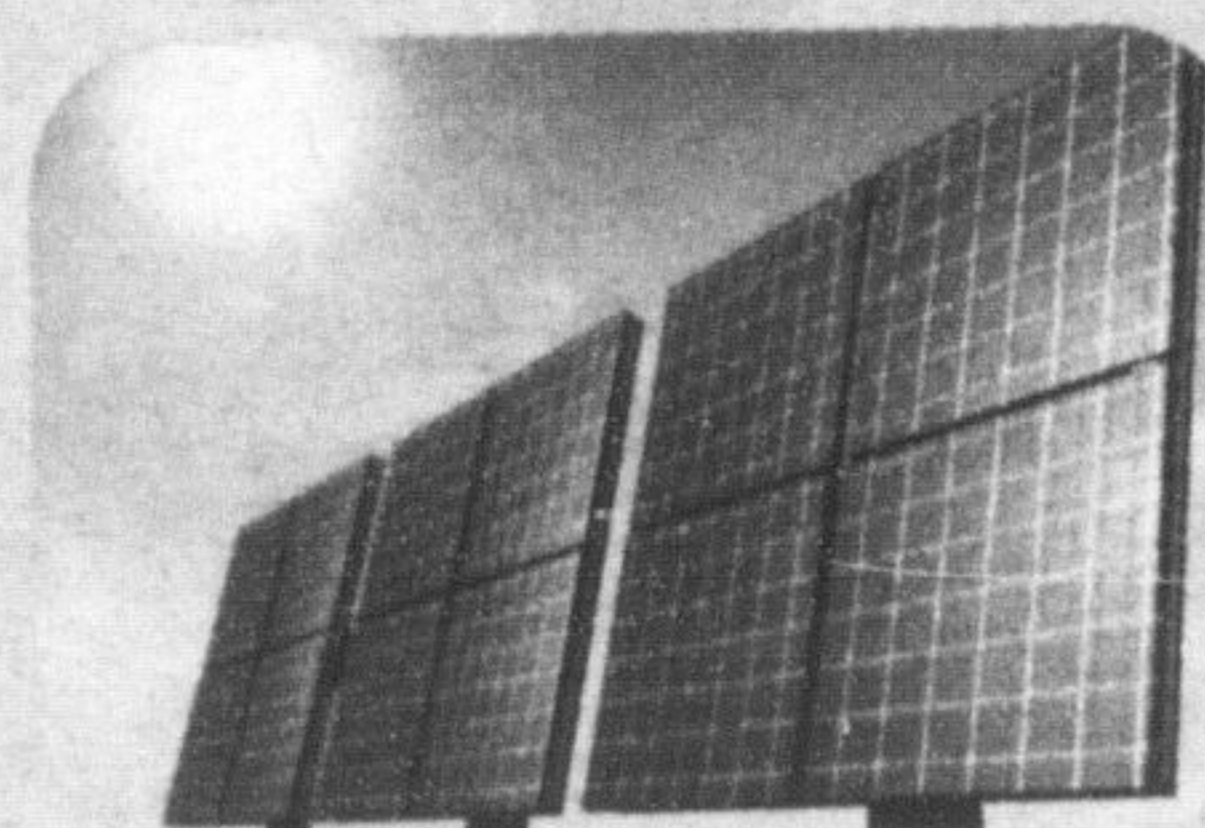
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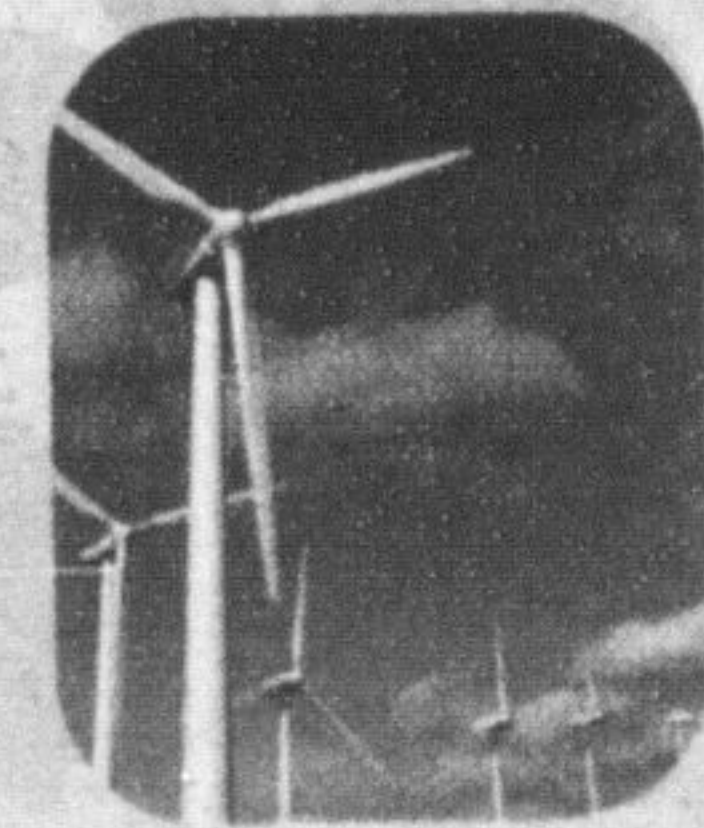
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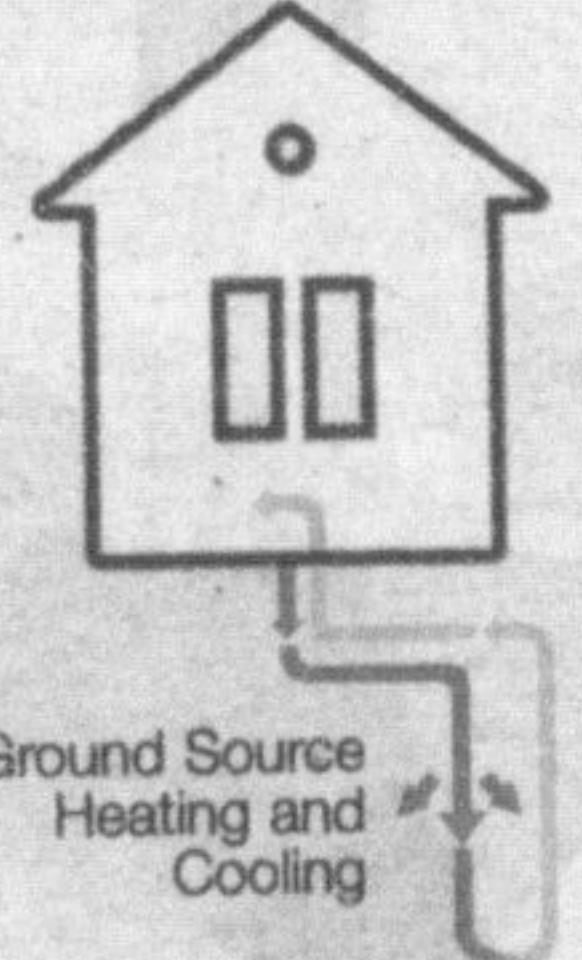
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