Operation garden relocation begins

The calendar may say we are nearly a month into spring, but for me it doesn’t really arrive until I start digging in the dirt.

Turning over the soil and beginning to plant is the act of faith that says warmer days are ahead. The earth is still cold but it too welcomes the longer days and the growing strength of the sun.

This year’s arrival of spring happened to cruelly coincide with a day more like the season past. The temperature barely crept past 40 with a howling wind out of the north that made it feel more like the lower 20s. But with a schedule filled with other commitments, it was the appointed day.

So donned in several layers, a stocking cap and insulated work gloves, I faced the task at hand.

Since moving back to the farm in 2006, we have had four different locations for our fruit and vegetable garden. Make it five in 2025.

Our previous location became choked off with weeds as I lost the war against quack grass and other noxious invaders. It also was quite a ways from the house.The new spot is more convenient, closer to water and has been part of our lawn for a few years.

Operation Garden Relocation began last fall. Not wanting to use chemicals to kill the vegetation, we covered the area with a heavy plastic tarp to smother the grass. But I quickly discovered that the turf stakes that I used were not enough to hold the tarp against the wind gusts.

The solution was a menagerie of heavy objects, including steel fence posts, chunks of wood, rocks and even a few metal lawn chairs. Just when I figured I had enough weight, another northerly blast would lift a corner of the tarp and overturn it. The final solution was about 20 strategically placed concrete blocks.

After I retrieved all of my winter weights, I pulled the tarp and the plastic covering a few other smaller strips that were laid for other plantings. The large garden area was to be tilled by a neighbor with a tractor and a cultivator, but the smaller strips I planned to dig with my rototiller.

I went to the barn to get the tiller and discovered one of the tires was flat. The air leaked out just as fast as my air compressor could put it in. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve used equipment with a flat tire and won’t be the last.

Undaunted, I pushed the machine to the garden area and fired it up. The first strip was tilled in a few minutes. But about halfway through the second strip, the rototiller’s tines stopped moving. I tried adjusting the tension on the trip cable that operates the tines, but that was futile.

I wheeled the machine back to the barn and popped off the housing. I am not a small engine expert, but I quickly ascertained the cause of the breakdown. The drive belt had snapped in two pieces.

After muttering a few choice words that were not flattering to the machine that was only a few years old, I went inside to warm up and searched online for a replacement belt. I muttered some additional choice words about tariffs and the like when I discovered the belt was more than $50. I found one for $39 and may live to regret that choice later on.

My wife Sherry – equally bundled up against the icy wind – joined me outside as we dug up rose bushes to transplant. We also planted four apple trees that had been shipped by the nursery.

Our neighbor then arrived and dug up the large garden space with a few passes of the cultivator, saving me at least a few hours of rototiller time. I did hold my breath when during the second pass there was a loud clunking noise coming from the cultivator. A piece of iron rebar buried in the dirt had wrapped around the auger. Thankfully we were able to bend it enough to pull it free and there was no damage done to the cultivator.

The next day Sherry planted 50 asparagus crowns and 250 strawberry plants. I dug up, divided and transplanted some rhubarb and hauled a few wheelbarrows of dried manure to cover the plants and gave everything a good soaking.

There’s plenty more to be done. There are more transplants to come and more flowers and vegetables to sow after we escape the frost season.

But Phase I of Operation Garden Relocation is complete.

Will I get my tiller fixed in time for Phase II?

Stay tuned for the next episode.