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Keeping Soil Healthy

By Sintilia Miecevole

Soil is a composition of weather-beaten rock, minerals, decayed plant materials and other organic ingredients. All this takes a long time to develop, but can be damaged by our action or neglect in a single season.

Plants can obtain nutrients from the soil using their roots and change them to usable materials to grow new roots, leaves and flowers.

All gardeners are to be custodians of the soil, taking the time to replace food and other elements as they are used. We need to treat it like we want to be treated, not like dirt.

Healthy soil should contain a mix of air, water, nutrients and organic matter. We can protect this mixture by:

Adding organic matter on a regular basis is probably one of the most important things we can do. Adding compost, cover crops and animal manure can do many things:

- + increases the soil's capability to hold nutrients.
- + makes food available to plants over a longer period of time.
- + lessen the amount of nutrients lost by erosion or leaching.
- + provides micro-nutrients that are needed by plants in small amounts.
- + release nutrients already in the soil by increasing the action of beneficial microorganisms.
- + increases the water-holding capacity for sandy soils.
- + increase the drainage of clay soils.
- + saves money.

Do not apply fertilizer to lawns until we get a good soaking rain, and for the best, safest, long-lasting results use organic fertilizers. The wet soil puts the nutrients into a solution and helps distribute the nutrients to the plant roots to be absorbed.

The ability of soil to drain water is important. But when you read phrases like "plant in a well-drained soil" or "does not like wet feet", they are talking about the plant's need for air. The roots of plants require oxygen and any soil that is waterlogged will be lacking oxygen.

Keeping Soil Healthy

Many plants will put up with high moisture—conditions during the growing season, but when the plants are dormant the same conditions may kill them. By improving the drainage the plant will have a better growing environment.

Another problem is soil becoming compacted by tractors and other equipment or just by tilling it year after year. You will find soil compaction in most soils, from gardens to farm fields.

Tilling the soil when it is too wet will clump and ruin the composition of the soil. This condition takes a long period of time to bring it back to health. To tell if the soil is too wet take a handful and squeeze it, if it crumbles in your hand then it is ready to till but if it clumps then it is too wet. Some people now believe that tilling at all is not good for the structure of the soil. It exposes the helpful microorganisms to the environment and they are destroyed.

Gardeners may wonder if it is best to till the garden in the fall or spring. Tilling the soil in the fall has

advantages over springtime. When spring arrives it allows for earlier planting since the basic soil preparation is done. Tilling in the fall allows a large amount of organic matter to be turned into the soil and start decomposing because the microbes are active currently.

An excellent source of organic matter is the fall leaves. Try tilling a thick layer of leaves into the soil this fall and by spring it will have decomposed.

Fall is a good time to test your soil and should be done every couple of years. In conclusion, doing all the previous steps should be done the organic gardening way. It's back to basic.

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Chicken Soup for the Soil

By Jean Fritz

Keeping Your Soil Healthy

Your soil is the most important part of your garden, but too many people forget to nurture their soil. Soil is a living thing, containing microbes, fungi, insect life and general "creepy-crawlies" vital to plant health and vigor, as well as a receptacle for chemicals and trace elements. Doing a little soil prep every fall pays off each and every harvest.

First, add more organic matter. Use your rototiller or your spade, and dig under frostbitten plant material, grass clippings, leaves, wood chips, and compost. Avoid using any diseased plant material as compost - burn it first if there are no local restrictions on burning. If you live near any livestock, cover your garden with 1 - 2" of uncomposted manure, then disguise that with other organic materials, and let the whole thing winter over. A blanket of snow from December through March will turn all of it into about ¼" of the most beautiful topsoil you can imagine.

It's also time to think about soil pH, or the acidity or alkalinity. The addition of organic materials can lower the pH, or make it more acidic. If your soil is already high in acid and you'd like to neutralize it, you can also add lime or wood ashes to your garden. Wood ashes are wickedly alkaline, but after a season or two, create an excellent haven for earthworms and add enough potash to the soil to grow wonderful root crops.

Finally, feed your fungi. Really. Many stores specializing in products for organic gardening and sustainable agriculture sell micorrhizal spores, which is a fungus that helps soil release its nutrients more easily. Micorrhiza needs to be fed in order to reproduce and survive the winter. Use a hose-end sprayer, and fill it halfway with gooey, blackstrap molasses. If you can find the sulphured kind, so much the better. Fill the rest of the sprayer with flat beer, and spray the solution over your garden beds. The sugar in the molasses feeds the existing fungi and beneficial bacteria in the soil, and the yeasts and enzymes in the beer add more.

You'll literally make your soil come alive, and that will help your garden thrive next year.

Jean Fritz is a farmer and freelance writer. She owns and operates KittyVista Organics, a small organic farm located east of Indianapolis which specializes in heirloom, open pollinated and unusual varieties of flowers and vegetables. Visit the KittyVista website at

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