

How to Take Care of my Soil

Learning to properly maintain soil is an important aspect of gardening that creates a situation where plants can thrive beyond what they normally would. In fact the most successful home gardeners I know have a working knowledge of how to care for their soil. What is even better though is that taking care of the soil is not hard to do.

The first bit of advice I give to folks who want to improve their soil is to have their soil tested. An inexpensive test from USU will diagnose most potential problems a home gardener may face. For more information about this, visit the USU Analytical Laboratory webpage at <http://usual.usu.edu>.

Another bit of advice I give to folks is that it is often not the best idea to haul in top soil from an outside source. I recommend working with the soil you have. A quote about this I feel is relevant comes from a WWI Victory Gardening Guide published by the War Department. It states, "The backyard gardener must use the soil he has, but he can improve it if it is poor, and he must do so as far as possible". This is true for a couple of reasons. First, for any appreciable benefit from hauling in top soil, several inches worth must be applied. Applying a small amount, such as 1 to 2 inches, over the top of existing soil usually will not improve the situation but may make matters worse. The second is that when soil is hauled in, how do you know that it is actually better than what you already have?

Some situations where I may recommend hauling in top soil include if soil is so rocky it cannot be cultivated or dug in, if the grade in a particular area must be raised, if raised beds have been built or the existing soil is found, through testing, to not be acceptable for growing most crops.

With this being said, how can the soil you have be improved? The best way is through adding compost and organic material such as well cured animal manure. As compost and manure decompose in the soil, they improve drainage in a clay soil, add water holding capacity in a sandy soil, and makes existing soil nutrients more available than what they normally would be.

Especially during this time of year, gardeners do not have to spend lots of money on compost because leaves are dropping from trees and can be incorporated into gardens and flower beds. One thing I do to make tilling them in easier is use a lawn mower to collect and chop the leaves up first. I have also mowed over the leaves once they are spread in the garden.

To improve soil, incorporate around 3 inches of compost into the soil in the fall or early spring. Otherwise, manure should be added in the same amount during the fall. Once you are happy with your soil, adding 1 inch of compost or manure a year will maintain the soil you have.