

THE JOY OF SOIL AMENDMENT

Preparing your beds from Scratch

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Chocolate cake. That is what good soil looks like. It has a nice crumbly texture too. This is the ideal soil for gardens. Soil this rich provides nutrients and good drainage while allowing moisture retention. Unfortunately, it doesn't come in a box. It is made from scratch by mixing in a few basic ingredients. But before I share my recipe, let's talk about preparation.

If your future garden bed is currently sod covered, well, that must be removed. A small area can be cleared by hand using a spade or hand trowel to dig three inches down and then lifting the sod up. A rototiller is better for larger areas. It churns the sod and the soil. Large chunks of sod can be tossed onto the compost pile for decomposing. Remove the large rocks and stones but leave the small ones to aid with drainage. I avoid sprays to kill sod because I have children, pets, and a concern for the environment. A weedy area can be covered with sheets of newspapers with the "ingredients" placed directly on top and left to decompose, while an already bare area can just be amended. Soil should be loosened to a depth of about eight inches, unless you are using newspaper.

Okay, now it's time to add the organic materials. Here's my recipe:

- heaping shovelfuls of leaf mulch
- homemade compost
- several bags of composted manure
- several bags of humus

I have also used leftover sand, bags of soil conditioner, coffee grinds (free at Starbucks), and peat moss. Peat moss use is controversial as it is a dwindling natural resource (my dad insisted on sharing his because it was on sale).

I don't have a formula, but adding at least two inches makes a good start. Initially, I'll put two or three ingredients onto loosened soil, and fold that in, mixing well to ensure good distribution. Then after planting, I'll add another layer. Each season brings another layer of organic material. Over time, the hard clay soil that cracks in the heat or forms small lakes after much rain, will transform into this dark, finger-sifting material that beautifully nurtures plants, flowers and beneficial insects.

So, you can have your cake and eat it too, after all.

For free advice on your gardening problems, contact Fairfax County Master Gardeners:

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