

Great Gardens Begin With Great Soil

by Skip Richter, Travis County Extension Director

It may sound like a play on words, but it's true that all good gardens begin in the soil. Most of us start off with something less than Eden when it comes to a garden spot. Too sandy, too clayey, too thin, you name it—we've got it here in central Texas. But we are not limited to our current "lot in life." We can improve our soil and turn our landscape into a place of beauty. In other words, get the soil right and your garden will thrive.

We can buy soil and soil amendments to improve our soils. We can also make compost at home to produce a small amount of that rich "black gold" that turns poor soil into rocket fuel for plants.

There are two basic ways to improve your soil:

1. Blend in compost to improve its structure, nutrient content and ability to hold moisture while at the same time draining well during periods of wet weather.
2. Bring in a soil mix to spread out over an area or to build raised beds for growing flowers, shrubs, and vegetables.

Let's take a look at each of these approaches to soil building.

If your soil has adequate depth and simply needs some improvement, spread several inches of compost over an area and mix it in as deeply as you can. This will enhance the soil in the root zone of the plants and improve your gardening results dramatically.



Soil with lots of compost

If you have a spot that is poorly drained or where there is only a thin layer of soil over underlying rock it may be best to bring in a special soil mix to build up your soil depth for gardening. These mixes come in many forms and typically have a blend of loam or sand along with composted bark, manure, or other decomposed organic matter. They have names like bed mix, planting mix or landscaper's mix.

Rather than lay this material directly on the surface it is best to spread out a few inches and then rototill or spade it into the existing soil on the site.

Then spread more over the area to build up the soil to the desired depth. This blending technique will prevent the dramatic interface between two different types of soil that can impede root penetration and may result in a "perched water table," as water will not readily move from the loose, compost-enhanced mix into an underlying clay layer.

The single best thing all gardeners can do is to improve to their soil before placing the first plants or seeds in the ground. Whether that means adding compost to improve the quality of the soil or bringing in a special soil/compost blend to increase the depth of the soil, first prepare the soil and then plant the plants.

You may have heard the old adage that you should not put a 10-dollar plant in a 10-cent hole. To that wisdom I would add that you should not spend a dollar on a plant without first spending a dollar on your soil. Soil building saves you money in the long run with fewer lost plants, lower water use, and reduced fertilizer and pesticide applications. It also means more beautiful and productive gardens.



A rototiller is useful for working organic matter down into the soil to prepare a planting bed.