

Building Healthy Soils

While most folks are winding down their gardening efforts for the season, fall gardening is coming into full swing, and it is actually a great time to be thinking about your soil for next year. Gardens want a healthy soil in which to grow plants. This includes ample organic matter, good drainage, sufficient water holding capacity, a rich supply of nutrients and active biological life. Unfortunately, healthy soils are commonly removed during the building process, leaving a new home sitting atop sub-soils, which are often compacted and devoid of nutrients.

Before you can build a healthy soil, you need to know what you have to work with. Soil tests are a great way to determine soil pH, nutrient contents and organic matter content. Simply feeling the soil, running it through your fingers is a good way to identify the texture of your soil. Sandy soils feel gritty and clods break apart very easily. Clay soils are sticky and clods are very hard. A clay soil can be molded in your hands. Loam soils, the ideal condition for gardening, feel smooth in your hand. They are easy to work.

Surface and sub-soil types vary significantly across the state. If you live near a river you may have a very sandy soil, while other areas have heavy clays. Fortunately, the secret to improving soil is the same for both conditions. And that secret is organic matter. Organic matter is a term used to describe living and dead materials derived from plants or animals including, compost, manure, straw, leaves, grass clippings or kitchen scraps. Organic matter enriches soils by providing a surface area where water and nutrients can bind. In clay soils, organic matter loosens structure to improve drainage. Organic matter also invites beneficial organisms into the soil. Soils rich in organic matter are going to have a darker color and many more nutrients.

Fall is a great time of year to add organic matter to the garden. It will decompose over the winter months to build healthier soils.

For further information regarding composting, gardening, or building soils, please call or come by the Murray County OSU Extension office. Office phone (580)622-3016.

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