



Winter is a great time to build healthy soil

With the winter season on the horizon, some may think this is down time for gardeners; however, this time of year can remain busy.

Successful gardening is much more than the plants that are grown or the design of the landscape. It all starts with the soil. A gardener's level of success depends heavily on the preparation and use of the soil.

A good, healthy garden needs good, healthy soil that includes plenty of organic matter, is well-drained, offers sufficient water-holding capacity, an active biological life and an ample supply of nutrients. This time of year provides gardeners with an opportunity to start building healthy soil for the next gardening season.

For those who may have moved into newly constructed homes with no landscape, this plant-growing down time is the best opportunity to start building your soil. The landscape in a new home often is subsoil since the topsoil likely was removed during the building process. These subsoils usually are devoid of nutrients and often compacted due to the use of heavy equipment.

To get started building a healthy soil, first start by learning what type of soil you have. Begin with a soil test to determine pH, as well as nutrient and organic matter contents. It's also helpful to have a good understanding of the texture of the soil. Sandy soil is gritty and doesn't hold water or nutrients very well. Clay soils are sticky, can be molded in your hands and enables water runoff. The ideal soil for gardening is loam, which feels smooth in your hand and is easy to work.

Incorporating organic matter will help improve less-desirable soils. Organic matter enriches the soils by providing a surface area where water and nutrients can bind. Organic matter can be finished compost, manure, grass clippings, leaves or kitchen scraps. This material helps loosen up clay soils to improve drainage. A well-composted material works well in potted plants, too. Soils rich in organic matter are going to have a darker color and many more nutrients.

Because most gardeners don't have a lot going on in their garden spaces, this is a great time of year to add organic matter to garden and landscape beds. These materials will decompose during the winter months and help build a richer, healthier soil for spring.

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