



HOW TO IMPROVE GARDEN SOIL

Mention the idea of working with the soil and some people's eyes positively glaze over. Can it really be as much fun to work with soil as it is to work with plants? Yes! When you provide a better place for plants to grow, they'll reward you with bigger blooms, longer-lasting flowers, and fewer pest and disease problems. Here's how to grow healthier plants through better soil.

Good garden soil has the following characteristics:

- Good drainage (soil isn't waterlogged for long periods of time, but also doesn't drain instantly)
- High nutrient availability (plants get enough food from the soil)
- Structure and air movement (so that roots can easily grow and have access to oxygen)

Improve soil structure

When you pick up a handful of soil, does it feel gritty? If so, then you have sandy soil. If your garden is composed of sandy soil, it needs help. Water and nutrients both drain and wash out of sandy soil quickly, before plants can take advantage of either. To get the most out of fertilizers, make sure that the soil around the plants can hang onto it.

Compost: One of the easiest ways to improve soil is by adding compost. It is the duct tape of the gardening world. It enhances drainage, provides extra food, helps with compaction problems and improves soil structure. There are many different types of bagged compost available, if you haven't started your own pile.

Mushroom compost, composted cow manure and other types of compost are easy to add to the garden soil. Spread them on top of the soil, or work them in with a spade. After adding compost to your garden, you'll notice that plants really do grow larger and greener.

Potting Mix: Most container garden **potting mixes** come with fertilizer as part of the mix. That makes it easier to grow container plants, which are continually watered during the growing season. When plants are watered as frequently as many container plantings require, nutrients that the plants need are washed out of the pots. Slow-release fertilizer in potting mixes takes care of this problem for a while, but eventually, you'll have to start feeding container plants again.

Garden soil in our areas works the same way. Even after adding compost to the soil, many plants still need supplemental feeding throughout the growing season. Improving the soil, though, will help you get more out of each feeding by helping the soil hold onto the fertilizer until the plants use it.

