

## **“Great Gardens Begin with Great Soil”**

By Skip Richter

Great gardens begin with great soil. Most of us start off with something less than Eden when it comes to a garden spot. Too sandy, too clayey, too high pH, too acidic, you name it; we've got it here in 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 mixes 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. Compost helps clay soil absorb water faster and drain faster. It helps sandy soil hold water and nutrients.

There are two basic ways to improve your soil:

- 1) Mix 2-3 inches of compost into your soil to improve its structure, nutrient content, and ability to hold moisture while at the same time draining better internally during periods of wet weather.
- 2) Purchase a soil bed mix to spread out over an area to build raised beds for growing flowers, shrubs, and vegetables.

If your soil has adequate depth and simply needs some improvement, option #1 can enhance the soil in the plant's root zone and improve your gardening results dramatically.

If you have a spot that is poorly drained it may be best to bring in a special soil mix to create taller raised beds for best results. 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 garden mix, rose soil, veggie & herb mix, or landscape bed mix.

To create a better transition with your current soil, spread a few inches of the bed mix over the soil and use a spading fork to break up the top few inches of the soil, which will mix it in a little. Then spread more over the area to build up the soil to the desired depth. Make the bed a little higher than desired and mound over the top a little to allow for some settling of the bed mix which will occur.

The single best thing all gardeners can do is to improve their soil before placing the first plants or seeds in the ground. To put it concisely, for a great landscape and garden, spend some dollars on your soil before you spend dollars on plants. I like to put it this way, “brown stuff before green stuff.”

Soil building saves you money in the long run with less need to replace lost plants, lower water use, and reduced fertilizer and pesticide applications. It also means that plants will grow faster and perform better for more beautiful and productive gardens.

A soil test is a great tool for fine tuning your soil. Go to the state soil lab website at <http://soiltesting.tamu.edu> and download the Urban Soil Submittal Form, which is the form for lawn, garden, and landscape soils. It has instructions for taking and submitting a sample. When the results are in, you'll receive recommendations for nutrient additions, and your County Extension Office can advise you on the best options.