

Healthy Soil, Healthy Plants

BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES

Most gardeners are aware that soil preparation is important in a new landscape with poor or compacted soil, but when spring fever hits it's easy to start planting as soon as the weather warms up. Putting in the time to ready your soil makes a big impact, though, and will make a difference in the long-term.

Many soils in built areas (around homes, businesses and roads) are compacted "dead" zones that can make it tough for new plants to establish roots. Making the effort to build and heal your soil now, before you plant, can prevent major plant loss later on.

Rainy or damp weather can make early spring soil preparation difficult but late May and early June are still good times to plant. In very disturbed or compacted soils, you may even want to wait a year and put in a cover crop now to build up your soil through summer, or even through fall and winter. Seed mixes that include legumes and tuberous plants like radishes and turnips are good options to loosen the soil.

Here are some tips for getting a new garden bed ready to plant:

- Fix low spots before you break ground. It's much easier to identify bumpy areas before disturbing the ground. To level things out, use top soil instead of compost since compost is made up of organic matter that decomposes and can sink over time. Top soil will provide a more permanent fix to the grade.
- Spread organic matter. Compost is simply decayed organic material that is used as a plant fertilizer. Topdressing with aged compost kickstarts the process of rebuilding soil structure, which is vital to plants and especially new trees. Compost, biochar, wood waste, kitchen waste, leaf mulch and grass clippings all work well.
- Flip your soil gently with a shovel if it's compacted. Mechanical tillers and wheeled equipment may actually increase compaction below the surface. They're great at breaking up the surface of the soil but can create a hard layer underneath where the blades scrape the layers they don't reach.
- Activate the soil. Healthy soil includes living organisms like insects, worms, fungi and microbes that tend to be lacking in disturbed areas. Using local materials like leaves or grass clippings for mulch will help bring living fungi and microbes back into the garden.

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