

Soils

Build your soils

Good soil is the key to healthy plants and a successful garden. If you have limited money or time, put your resources into improving your soil. This will make all other gardening tasks easy.

Test your soil

A soil test is the best way to learn what the pH of your soil is and what fertilizer it need. Do not add lime unless recommended by soil test results.

If you suspect your soil is contaminated from something that was there prior to your garden, test for contaminants before growing anything you eat.

Prepare your soil for planting

On a day that hasn't had any rain, pick up a handful of soil and squeeze it. If the soil falls out in pieces, it is dry enough to dig. If it stays in a mud ball, it is too wet, so try again tomorrow.

Remove all weeds, sod, trash and rocks. If you have a lot of weeds, lay plastic down on the soil for a few weeks before you plant. That will kill the weeds without any harmful side-effects.

Apply compost, fertilizer and any soil amendments suggested by a soil test before tilling.

Turn over or till your soil to a depth of 8 to 12 inches.

Work compost into your garden soil every year

Adding compost is beneficial for almost all soils. Compost or decomposed organic matter makes soils alive and fertile.

Compost must be added every year because your plants use up all the nutrients.

Don't compact your soil

Do not walk or operate heavy equipment over wet soil.

Soils often remain cold, wet, and heavy late into spring. Digging in those conditions, further compacts the soil and creates a solid mass where new roots cannot grow.

Consider gardening in raised beds if your soil is heavy, compacted or contaminated.

Layer 2 to 3 inches of mulch in your garden

Natural mulches, such as wood chips, can prevent weeds, conserve water, and moderate soil temperatures.

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Developed by James Manning, Undergraduate Research Assistant, and Daniel Brainard, Vegetable Extension Specialist; MSU Department of Horticulture; Gary Heilig, MSU Extension educator.

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