

Getting the dirt on soil



Carla Keast

AROUND THE YARD

Good soil can make the difference between a healthy thriving plant, and one that's just getting by. Like a kitchen where there's ample food, clean water, comfy chairs, and plenty of elbow room, ideal soil provides nutrients, water, air, and support for grow in.

Soil is not a single thing, but the combination of minerals (clay, silt, sand) which determines the moisture holding ability and the air space potential, and organic materials (compost, peat moss, manure) which supply nutrients. As long as it's supporting plant growth and being exposed to rain, wind, and freezing temperatures, soil will be in a constant state of change. Kind of like a kitchen where teenagers live.

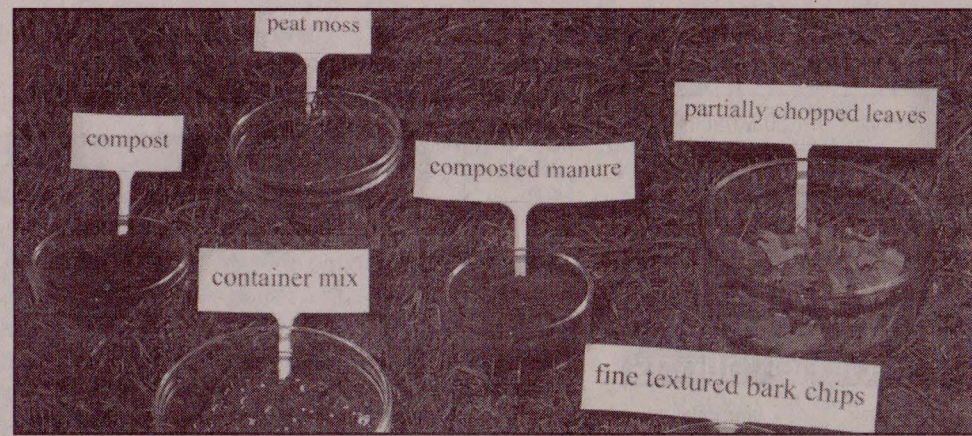
Our clay based Prairie soils tend to hold water, compact and erode easily, and develop a thick crusty layer after many sunny days. Not so appetizing for

plants.

Drainage can be improved by double digging the bed. Dig out about a shovel's depth of soil, and set it aside. Plunge a shovel or pitch fork into the lower layer to loosen it up. Master Gardener Colleen Zacharias recommends adding peat moss and then replacing the excavated soil. This is hard work, but it does pay off.

Drainage can also be improved by adding organic materials such as peat moss, compost, composted manure, partially chopped leaves, or fine textured bark mulch. Organic materials are also a source of nutrients. Digging in organic material will improve both drainage and nutrient levels. Using it as a mulch will add nutrients, and slow compaction, erosion, and crust formation.

In beds with existing plants, a five-to-eight cm layer of organic material used as a mulch, topped up each spring, will improve the soil over time. In the vegetable garden, a five-to-eight cm layer of mulch between the plants will protect the soil surface and add nutrients to the garden during the summer. After harvest in the fall, cover the whole garden plot with organic material and dig it in to a



Submitted photo

Samples of various types of organic material that can be added to your gardens.

depth of about twenty cm.

Compacted soil is unhealthy soil, so walk on it as little as possible, particularly when it's wet.

For pots, a bagged container mix is best. Most contain sufficient nutrients for a full season's growth, but will need to be replaced the following season.

Just like a kitchen, good soil needs to be cared for and regularly restocked.

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