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Spring Garden Preparation - Improving the Soil

How can you tell if your soil is healthy?

Pick up a handful of soil and rub it between your fingers. If it turns to powder, it lacks organic materials, such as decomposed plant life, which hold moisture. If the soil is gritty and yellowish it may be too sandy. Slippery, sticky soil contains too much clay. Beware of black soil particularly if it has a sour odour - it may be too acidic for plants. If it is dark brown and crumbles into fairly large moist pieces - it is rich in organic matter which is exactly what you want.

Also look at the health of your plants. If your plants are spindly they may have difficulty establishing a good root system in hard-packed soil low in organic material.

Four ways to improve your soil:

Good soil is a balanced mixture of sand, clay, silt and organic matter. Sand provides drainage; silt and clay are the "glue" that hold your soil together and keep nutrients from washing away; organic matter fosters the growth of micro-organisms which aerate the soil and provides nutrients. Creating a balance between these elements will ensure a healthy crop.

- Add "black gold". This can be in the form of backyard compost or you can purchase well-aged animal manure. If you are applying manure in the spring, you must be careful that the manure is at least six months old, otherwise you may burn young plants. It is the nitrogen in manure that makes it "hot". Note that chicken manure is very high in nitrogen and should be used sparingly.
- Start a compost. Having a steady supply of pesticide- and heavy metal-free compost is the best thing you can do for your garden. This is especially important if you are growing edible plants. You can purchase a compost container, dig a hole for compost material or build a makeshift compost. Compost is a great way to recycle lawn cuttings, leaves and vegetable peelings.
- Acidity is an important consideration. If you have pine trees near your garden you most likely have acidic soil. As well, some regions are naturally more alkaline or acidic. Either extreme will inhibit plant growth. Home pH test kits are available at garden stores. Lime is one addition to correct acidity.
- Move your garden. After years in the same location, a garden can become exhausted of its nutrients. Certain plants have a large appetite for nitrogen, phosphorus or potassium (the basic ingredients of most fertilizers). Repeatedly planting the same annuals can cause a serious deficiency in a nutrient. Pick a new area of lawn or an area which has been laying fallow for at least a few years. Microbes need time to re-establish themselves and improve the quality of the soil.

Take a close look at your soil to decide if it is suffering from any deficiency or contamination. Remember that it's hard to go wrong by adding compost. Healthy soil will reward you with lush flowers, fruits and vegetables all summer!