

## The Real Dirt on Soil in the Garden

SUE GOETZ  
In the Garden

Soil is the essence of any garden; its composition will define the type of plants that will grow and where water goes. It can also characterize the type of gardener you can be. All good gardeners have good soil. Some consider it the life force of their gardens. I recently attended a talk by two ladies from England. Their topic chronicled the building of a garden from the beginning to its current beauty. They recounted their search to purchase a home. The ladies found a place that seemed to meet their needs, but the sale of the home hedged on a soil test. The type of soil in the garden was as important as having enough bedrooms and bathrooms.

Building good soil should be every gardener's priority. Soil is a mix of rock fragments and organic matter teaming with micro-organisms. In simple terms the job of soil is to provide a place to hold plants up and supply nutrients and water. When you think of it that way it becomes very important from the moment you purchase a plant. Texture and structure are typical words in soil terminology. The texture of topsoil is how coarse or fine it feels. Particle sizes from the gritty feel of sand to the smooth slick feel of clay. The particle size determines how water drains thru and how organic matter clings on. The individual elements of

sand, silt or clay cluster to make up the structure. What kind of soil do you have? The tools you need to find the answer is your eyes, hands and a maybe a shovel. Pick up a small amount of loose dry soil. Squeeze it tight in your hand. Ideally it should hold together in a firm shape but will break apart when dropped back to the ground. Sandy thin soil feels gritty and will not hold a shape. Heavy clay soil feels sticky and will not crumble when dropped to the ground. The color should be a rich dark color. Why is all this important to know? A soil with sand and larger particles will drain faster running nutrients thru quicker meaning soil that tends to be dry and nutrient deficient. Whereas smaller particles form clay that binds together making it heavy and harder to drain or dig in. This can be a clue to failing planting areas or yellowing plants. A good topsoil structure should be fluffy and act like a sponge catching water and allowing it to feed microorganisms, yet drain away fully down into the soil.

Building good nutritious soil in the garden is ongoing. You really can't change the native soil but you can improve it. The best way is to add amendments. Organic matter added to the soil helps change the structure and replenishes nutrients important to plant growth. In new beds and open garden areas pile it on deep and till or shovel down at least 8" (a good shovel turn). The

deeper the amended topsoil the easier it will be for roots to anchor down, take in nutrients, improve drainage and simply make it easier to garden in. When digging in new plants, mix organic compost in the soil about 50/50. Never put just 100% compost in a planting hole. Mix and blend the amendment in with the native soil. Organic matter never builds up, it decomposes and disappears. You can never really have too much organic matter, so pile it on yearly. It is that decomposing process that makes a healthy living soil. As a finish to planting areas, put your garden on a good diet of regular topdressing by applying organic compost mulch every year in the spring or fall.

Soil is not just a place to plunk down plants; it is a living part of the garden. Make soil building as much of a garden plan as picking out plants and laying out pathways.

Sue Goetz CPH, is a garden consultant, designer, speaker and writer from Gig Harbor. Visit [www.thecreativegardener.com](http://www.thecreativegardener.com) or e-mail questions to be answered in this column to [info@thecreativegardener.com](mailto:info@thecreativegardener.com).