

Improve soil quality for a better lawn

A lush, green lawn can vastly improve a home's curb appeal. Thick, healthy grass indicates that homeowners care enough about their properties to invest the time, effort and money to make them beautiful.

According to the landscaping tool company Troy-Bilt, soil fertility is the foundation of healthy lawns. In fact, the quality of the soil is essential whether one is growing acres of grass, potted plants or vegetable garden beds. No matter which type of soil a homeowner is working with, there are various ways to make it better.



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Remove thatch

Thatch is a tightly knotted layer of leaves, grass roots, stems, and other debris that accumulates between the grass blades and the soil. Too much thatch can hinder the movement of water, air and nutrients into the soil. According to organic fertilizer company Organo-Lawn, thatch often occurs if the production of dead organic material in the lawn exceeds the ability of the microorganisms in the soil to break down that organic matter. A half-inch of thatch is normal. If thatch gets too thick, it will need to be removed. The home improvement resource DIY Network says dethatching can take place in the summer, fall and winter using a thatching rake.

Aerate

A lawn aerator will create holes in the soil. This can improve drainage and encourage worms and helpful microorganisms that require oxygen to thrive in the soil. The Briggs & Stratton Company says the best time to aerate a lawn is during the growing season when the grass can heal and fill in any holes, such as spring and fall. Aeration can help develop deeper grass roots for a healthier lawn.

Test and amend soil

A great lawn has loamy soil, which has a key ratio of clay, silt and sand. Silt is a granular material of a size between sand and clay that originates from quartz and feldspar. It is the most fertile of the three types of soil components. Sand does not retain water, but it helps to create spaces in the

soil that permit air to circulate. Clay particles are small and bind together tightly, but clay is naturally nutrient-rich. The home improvement site BobVila.com says loamy soil should have equal parts sand and silt and half as much clay.

If the lawn is not yet established, loamy soil can be created and then the grass seeds planted. For established soil, after removing thatch and aerating, top-dressing the lawn can help. This involves adding a thin layer of soil over the lawn. It can improve the soil without killing the existing turf. Ideally, it should be done in early fall or spring, as this gives the grass time to grow through three to four more mowings before severe heat or cold sets in.

Healthy soil is vital to a lush lawn. It takes a little work, but improving soil can create vibrant, healthy, green grass.

Transplanting tomatoes early / growing vegetables vertically

Darl Henson
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For gardeners that would like to have their tomato plants produce earlier in the year, there are certain things to keep in mind according to K-State horticulture specialist. Most people who try to get a jump on the season set their tomatoes out early and hope they do well. However, that is often not a good plan as tomatoes have to have certain requirements before they will grow well. Those requirements are an acceptable soil temperature for root growth and an acceptable air temperature for both plant growth and fruit set.

For adequate root growth, tomatoes need a soil temperature of at least 55 degrees to do well. Plastic mulch is most commonly used to warm the soil. Several days may be needed to raise the soil temperature. Check the soil temperature 2.5 inches deep in the soil at about 11:00 a.m. If that is not possible, check the temperature before leaving for work and again when you return and use the average of the two. It is best to lay a drip irrigation line before installing the plastic to make watering more convenient.

As far as air temperature is concerned plants must be protected from frost. Hot caps or water teepees are placed over the young plants to provide protection as well as provide a higher average temperature to encourage growth. Eventually the plants will outgrow the cover and start to develop flowers. But if the temperature goes below 55 degrees at night, tomato flowers may not set. The plant is not hurt, but the blossom will not set fruit, or, if it does set fruit, the fruit is often misshapen.

How early can you transplant? Start with a date about 2 weeks earlier than normal which according to the K-State Kansas Garden Guide is early May.

A consideration for gardeners often is how to make more efficient use of the space in their garden. If that's a concern for you then maybe consider growing some of your crops vertically. Growing vertically not only helps conserve space but can also help prevent disease due to better air movement. In addition, harvesting can be easier.

Most people are familiar with tomato cages but other crops can also be trained to grow up a structure. Crops that can be grown vertically

include pole beans, peas, and the vining crops such as cucumbers, melons, squash and gourds. Edible-pod and snow peas are better adapted to growing vertically than English (shelling) peas as they have longer vines. Also, avoid growing "bush-type" vining crops vertically as they are bred to produce short vines. Another thing to keep in mind is that large fruit from vining crops may need to be supported so they don't damage the vine.

Once deciding to "verticalize" the plant growth, now the question is what can be used as an adequate support structure? Bamboo poles are often used to form a teepee to support pole beans. Supports can also be made from cattle panels. These are often 16 feet long and may need to be cut in half for better fit. These two half-panels can then be tied together at the top to form a "pup tent." Crops can then be planted at the base of each panel. Another way to support a cattle panel is to tie the panel to T-posts so that it will stand upright. If you have a small garden space, growing vertically can be a viable alternative to allow more crops to be grown in that limited space.

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