

DIRT CHEAP

LANDSCAPE AND GARDEN SUPPLY

DIGGIN' THE DIRT

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Volume 1 • Issue 2

Spring/Summer 2010

Why Does “Organic Matter” Matter?

“Organic” is a word with a variety of definitions that sometimes contradict each other. For the sake of this article, the only meaning that really matters is **organic matter**, otherwise known as **humus**.

Why does organic matter mean so much? The answer is that organic matter does so many wonderful things for a garden that without it, I don't think there would be organic gardening.

In nature, a plant takes its food from the debris left behind by animals and plants, including its own debris. When the debris interacts with weather, insects and soil microorganisms, it breaks down into humus. Left alone, the process can take a long time. Composting is, more or less, just speeding up nature's process.

The humus in your garden soil is the host to many beneficial microorganisms and insects. Beneficial microorganisms fight plant pathogens and can keep many problems from getting out of control. Some of these organisms can actually devour plant diseases while they secrete natural antibiotics back into the soil. Other microbes break down organic matter and secrete enzymes and acids into the soil that make minerals and nutrients available to your plants. And as a bonus, when a beneficial microorganism has finished its job, it becomes plant food!

So, as you can see, in matters of the garden, what really matters is **organic matter!**

Making Garden Soil Work

Think of your soil as the foundation of your garden. It all begins in the dirt. With a few basic rules of thumb for your soil, every gardener will be on the path to a healthier garden.

TYPE 1: CLAY SOIL

Clay is higher in nutrients than sand and holds water better. Sometimes it holds water too well and plants can't get enough air. Adding **Mendo Organics Compost** improves the structure of clay soils and adds beneficial microbes. Adding **gypsum** will also keep the clay from sticking together. Be careful when adding liming agents such as **dolomite** or you might accidentally make plaster, or even concrete!

TYPE 2: SANDY SOIL

Sandy soil drains well but needs organic matter and nutrients to make it great garden soil. Adding **Mendo Organics Compost** improves the texture of sandy soil, as well as its water- and nutrient-holding quality. **Greensand** helps by adding trace minerals

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— DIRT DOCTOR —

**Consultations are available with Scott.
Call for an appointment, 964-4211.**

WORKSHOPS

at Dirt Cheap

Mark your calendar!

April 7 • 5:30–7:00 p.m.

Sakina Bush, Noyo Food Forest
Presenting a composting workshop

May 5 • 5:30–7:00 p.m.

Dana Ecelberger, Master Gardener
at Stanford Inn by the Sea
How to grow your own organic food

June 2 • 5:30–7:00 p.m.

Dave Aschenbrenner
Designing and building your own greenhouse

July 7 • 5:30–7:00 p.m.

Scott Zeramby, Owner of
Dirt Cheap
Natural pest control

August 4 • 5:30–7:00 p.m.

Petra Schulte
Plants and nutrition

September 1 • 5:30–7:00 p.m.

Mario Abreu, Gardener at
Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens
Everything about growing dahlias

*More to come. Call to reserve
your space now! 964-4211*



MAKING GARDEN SOIL WORK — *Continued from Page 1*

and also improves sandy soil by binding the particles together to hold water better. A thick layer of mulch will keep water from evaporating from the surface.

TYPE 3: SANDY LOAM

Sandy loam is otherwise known as topsoil and is the best soil to start with. Over time, rainfall and poor agricultural practices can leach nutrients out of sandy loam and destroy the microbial life of these good soils. By periodically adding **Bioflora Dry Crumbles**, or **E.B. Stone granulated organic fertilizers** and carefully irrigating, any gardener can replenish their soil with an abundance of food, and their garden will do the same in return!

**Ask our staff about all the great amendments
and fertilizers we offer!**

Care and Feeding of the Veggie Garden

For many, there is nothing more satisfying than harvesting home-grown veggies. It is the voice of the earth speaking to the soul (or the stomach!) of the gardener. If you have never grown vegetables before, you are in for a treat on many levels.

Growing a vegetable garden is pretty easy. Depending on whom you ask, we humans have been doing this for quite some time. Anyone who's been at it for any length of time will tell you that the key to growing great-tasting vegetables is staying ahead of the problems. It takes a little knowledge, effort, and some degree of cooperation from Mother Nature. The real adventure of gardening is overcoming unexpected obstacles, learning how to expect the unexpected and, ultimately, ending the season with a hearty, delicious harvest. It is my hope that the following information will help give you the confidence to get your garden comfortably up and running. Because each person's garden is truly unique, you'll get to learn the rest as you go.

Although vegetables don't really need anything special, the adage "you only get out of it what you put into it" comes true in your veggie garden.

A plant's primary job is to make seeds so that it can reproduce itself for another generation. We harvest vegetables and fruits before the seeds are fully formed and released back into the soil. You can imagine how tiring this must be for plants.

One of our most important jobs as gardeners is to make sure that the soil continues to provide our plants everything they need to keep on growing vigorously. Well-working soil keeps your vegetable plants growing at a steady rate and insures a bountiful harvest of delicious and nutritious home-grown veggies.

WATERING — More Sunlight + More Water = More Veggies! Most gardens need about one to two inches of water every week. You can't always rely on rain to provide your garden with water, so an irrigation system of some sort is necessary for most veggie gardens. A simple drip system is pretty easy to install and costs a lot less than you might think. By putting the water where your plants want it, you'll save valuable time, precious water, and grow healthier plants.

WEEDING — Most vegetable plants would prefer not to have to fight a daily battle with weeds. Remove any existing weeds by their roots before planting and always keep pathways and between plants weed-free by cultivating or hoeing and applying a good layer of mulch wherever you can. Generous use of compost and mulches along

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Spring Cleaning Checklist

1. Remove plants that didn't make it over the winter.
2. Finish pruning.
3. Test and repair irrigation system.
4. Fertilize awakening perennials.
5. Apply mulch or compost.

Potato Patch in a Pot

Now until the end of summer is all about growing potatoes, potatoes... and more potatoes! This method of growing potatoes calls for a 25-gallon planting pot, but any similarly sized wine barrel, drum, or box can be used instead.

If you are growing in pygmy soil or just want an easy-to-harvest, gopher-proof, practically free **potato patch** for your porch or patio, just plant the potatoes that are sprouting in your cupboard!

In each pot, plant three to five potatoes with at least three sprouting eyes. For larger potatoes, cut them into pieces with three to five eyes. Allow the cut pieces to air dry on newspaper for a couple of days before planting.

Fill your pots with about six inches of well-draining soil or a mix of garden soil and rotted leaves, old hay or well-aged compost.

Place the potato or the pieces on top of the soil and cover with a few more inches of fluffy soil mixed with aged compost.

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CARE AND FEEDING... — *Continued from Page 2*

with regular weeding will keep your vegetable plants at an advantage.

FEEDING — A vegetable plant is only as healthy as the food it eats. A plant's ability to "uptake" its own food depends on several conditions: good soil structure, sunlight, dissolved plant nutrients and water. There are other things like soil PH and micronutrients that play important roles, but what you really need to know is whether your soil is loose, dark, smells "earthy" and drains well. Any well-balanced natural or organic fertilizer will easily provide vegetable plants a healthy diet. In exchange, your garden will share with you an experience of a lifetime.

Keeping Pests at Bay

Any experienced gardener knows that now and again, they will be going head-to-head with a pest or two. There are a few really important things you have to know before entering into battle.

Interplanting with companion plants and even other types of veggies and flowers will help your harvest. Insects and other pests seem to have their favorites in the garden.

Keep plants growing vigorously. Healthy plants usually recover from an infestation quickly. Many insects are known to seek out weaker, stressed plants for attack.

Think before you act! Sometimes a beneficial insect population is building up. Unless you are clear that you have a problem, it's prudent to wait and carefully watch.

Physical barriers, such as reusable floating row covers or copper snail and slug strips, can be employed at planting or later on to keep pest issues down. These valuable tools can help plants become established even when pests are lurking nearby.

1. Make certain that there is a problem and that you know exactly what it is. There are a number of insects that will do a little damage and move on, while others will destroy your efforts in short order.

2. If all else fails and you must apply some sort of spray or intrude into the natural cycle, choose the least toxic first. Even with organic and natural pesticides, it is critical to know exactly which pest you are dealing with and to follow the directions accordingly!

Dirt Cheap highly recommends using organic and naturally safe pest control for your garden whenever possible. Here are a few suggestions that will get you started:

Sluggo Plus™ will safely rid your garden of slugs, earwigs and sow bugs all at once!

Molemax™ is the perfect product to get rid of moles without harming your pets or kids.

Diatomaceous Earth sprinkled on and around your plants will deter aphids, scale, mites and more!

And then there are **Lady Bugs**. We sell them live and ready to devour your insect pests. Pick up a pack today; they're a big hit with the kids!

Introducing: DIRT CHEAP COCO BLEND SOIL

Formulated by experienced gardeners specifically for the Mendocino gardener. Ingredients include: coconut fiber infused with compost tea, composted rice hulls, feather meal, seabird guano, and kelp.

It's totally organic and it's on sale NOW in bags and by the truckload.

**At \$7.99 a bag, it's a
Dirt Cheap Deal!**

Call us now for details!

Water and Soil Testing

What is really in your water? How about your soil? Often times, a simple lab test can save you a lot of time and money. We now offer professionally administered water and soil testing! We've joined with two major laboratories to make it simple for you! All you have to do is follow the directions and then drop off the sample at Dirt Cheap. We'll do the rest! Stop guessing! Come on down to Dirt Cheap, and we'll fill you in on the dirty details!

POTATO PATCH IN A POT

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As the vines grow through the top of the soil, keep covering them up loosely with soil mix until they begin to flower. At this point, gently reach around the vines for delicious baby potatoes.

When the vines have died back completely, dump the pot out for the rest of your harvest. For storage, make sure you air dry or "cure" the potatoes so they don't rot in your cupboard.

