

# “Dirty Words for Gardeners”

January 11, 2010

by Annie Plowman

If you live in the valley, your soil will need some help to give you the beautiful lush plants that you desire. Dirt is a four letter word that you’ll need to drop from that vocabulary. Let’s get you some new dirty words. We’re going to discuss soil amendments.

First of all, most of us have heavy clay soil. That is sticky clay soil that binds together. Digging a hole to plant is a nightmare and the soil doesn’t drain properly. The nutrients your plants need get bound in the soil and are not readily released to the plant. People with heavy clay soil often have trouble with their plants and make the mistake of over-watering them in an attempt to save them. The plants usually die as a result.

There are others in our midst that are blessed with a sandy-loam soil. This is a soil with a sandy texture that drains well. One with sandy soil doesn’t often have to worry about over watering plants but oftentimes this soil can be lacking in organic matter.

Both of the soils above will benefit from the addition of organic matter. This organic matter is sold as soil amendments called “organic compost” or “composted humus“. This is the perfect amendment for the flower beds and new plantings including trees. Because a soil amendment is such an important component of successful gardening, many nurseries will extend the guarantee to homeowners only if you purchase the proper soil amendments when you purchase your plants.

Sometimes those of use with clay soil want that nice sandy soil and decide to add sand instead of compost. That’s a big mistake! Sand added (by itself) to a heavy clay soil is the perfect recipe for concrete. We will be much better off to amend our clay soil with a combination of compost and gypsum. Gypsum is a naturally occurring product that will also give a some help to that clay soil. It is safe to use.

One very important thing to remember is that planting in containers (pots etc) is different. One should buy products labeled “potting soil” for pots. It is formulated for the unique growing environment of a pot. This is one corner you don’t want to cut. Always use potting soil in pots.

Another consideration is acid planting mix. It’s not as scary as it sounds. This is also a soil amendment. Some plants prefer or require a lower ph or what is called an acidic soil. This includes plants like camellias, hydrangeas and azaleas and many plants that grow in the shade. (It also doubles as a good potting soil) Many plants will prefer a slightly acidic soil although there are some exceptions. Some of those exceptions are common plants here because alkaline soil is common here. Here is a link that lists some of those exceptions. I know you will recognize some of the plants.  
<http://www.recordonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080518/LIFE/805180305/-1/LIFE0306>

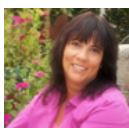
Some folks like to use manure in their garden. It is high in nitrogen and can often harm new plantings if used as a planting medium. Think of it more as a fertilizer than a planting medium. Use with care. Don’t fertilize with pet waste.

Now, if you’ve ever walked into a nursery for a bag of any of the above described items and asked for “fertilizer“, the sales person may have directed you something much different than you had expected. Although, replenishing your soil and it’s source of it’s organic matter is a wonderful thing, it is not the same as applying “fertilizer”. Fertilizers are generally products that are sold for the specific purpose of feeding your plants. We’ll have to cover that another time.

A bit of warning, adding un-composted organic materials to your garden can actually rob your soil and plants of nutrients, if even temporarily. Some may even have toxic properties. The compost products you buy at a reputable garden center have been aged and composted to ensure that the materials have been properly decomposed and are suitable for use in your garden. If you decide to make your own compost, it’s not a bad idea to do a bit of homework. You should be confident that everything going into the mix is suitable and that your methods are sound.

That said, there are some great soil amendments on the market that have been formulated to really pump up that soil and give your plants some great results. Some have organic fertilizers added and/or mycorrhizae to add to the root development of the plants. Read labels, ask questions and buy from a reputable source. Just don’t go into a nursery and ask for “dirt”.

So... Did you plant any pansies yet? Happy Planting!



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