



HELLMANN'S SOIL GUIDE

CONTENT PROVIDED BY OUR EVERGREEN GARDEN EXPERT

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Test Your Soil's pH Level

The pH level is a measure of the acidity of the soil. The pH scale ranges from 1-14. The lower the pH level of the soil, the more acidic it is. Most plants prefer conditions of pH 6-7. Find pH test paper or pH meters at a garden centre.

Preparing the soil

Test soil to check its fertility, soil structure, pH and toxicity. (You can pick up a soil-testing kit from your local hardware store.) Healthy gardens come from healthy soil, which should be fed with compost (preferably made on site), green manure and sustainable amendments.

Double dig soil to make raised permanent beds, instead of rototilling soil every year. Double digging is a method of deeply working the soil, ideal for creating permanent raised beds of well-drained soil. It is useful in areas where drainage or weed rhizomes (such as morning glory) are a problem. It involves removing the topsoil, cultivating the subsoil, and returning the worked topsoil to its original location. It is a work-intensive process, but is only done once. A loose, very well-draining soil results, and the planting bed will only need to be worked lightly with hoe and fork in future years.

Permanent beds help the soil web develop and is healthier for plants and garden ecosystem in the long run. Move soil into mounds and valleys to create microclimates specific to the plants you are growing. To build mounds, dig a 30 cm deep, 1 m wide hole and refill it with compost (or a compost/soil mix). Then pile a mix of soil and compost over the refilled hole, until the mound is about 30 cm high. Sow seedlings or seeds and apply mulch around seedlings as they grow.

Build and protect the soil

In fall, sheet mulch to build soil, retain moisture and prevent weeds from growing. Sheet mulching is composting over a large area using locally available resources. It is a great way to kill grass and build soil over the winter. To sheet mulch an area, you'll need a combination of Carbon-rich materials (cardboard, newspaper, leaves, straw, finely shredded wood shavings) and Nitrogen-rich materials (compost, green weeds, grass clippings, aged manure). You need anywhere from 70-99% Carbon and 1-30% Nitrogen.

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Grow cover crops or use mulch to cover the soil. Cover crops are used in three ways: as a green manure, as a living mulch and to catch nutrients that might be lost after main crops are harvested (i.e. they bind nutrients that might be washed away or, in the case of Nitrogen, be lost to the air). A great cover crop in summer is buckwheat, which acts as a green manure and living mulch. It also produces grain that humans or birds can use.

Cover crops may take more water, but can add Nitrogen and nutrients to the soil. Mulch reduces the need to water and weed in the summer, and protects the soil from harsh winter winds. Maintain or help stabilize soil ecosystem balance by avoiding the use of pesticides and fertilizers in the garden.

Feed the soil with compost and compost tea

Add compost to soil in spring or as a top dressing to plants.

Use compost tea instead of fertilizer to increase plant growth, provide nutrients to plants, increase beneficial organisms and suppress disease. Compost tea is made by stirring compost into water, stirring it and letting it steep. The tea can be used either as a foliar application (sprayed on the leaves) or applied to the soil (or on mulched beds). Compost tea “wakes up” soil by inoculating it with vital micro-organisms, fungi and nutrients.

Recipe for Compost Tea

Mix 1 part compost to 4 parts water in a large bucket. Leave enough room at the top for vigorous stirring. Stir the mixture, creating a vortex. Continue for 5 minutes, switching directions once in a while. Keep stirring like this, once every hour or two, for 3 hours to 2 days.

For more detailed information log on to <http://www.evergreen.ca>

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