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Helpful Garden Tips - Soil Preparation and Mulching*

*(*Disclaimer: Mary's is a greenhouse grower of plants and we don't currently offer landscape services. Greenhouse production is different than outside gardening. For professional advice, please consult a landscaper or full service garden center.)*

Do I need to prepare my soil before planting? For successful gardening, soil preparation is important. The condition of your soil determines how much preparation is necessary. If you are starting with new beds and don't know what kind of soil you have, consider checking for drainage issues. Observe how well it drains (or doesn't drain) during a good rain before planting. If you suspect you have drainage problems, a percolation test can be performed. Dig a hole about 12" in diameter and the depth of the soil you plan to plant/amend. Fill the hole with water and let it drain. Immediately repeat the process and if there is still water in the hole after 1 hour, you may have drainage problems. If you do, consider making raised beds or amend the soil enough to fix the problem. Before planting, all the vegetation needs to be removed and the soil worked so that the new plants can root in easily. You might also want to perform a ph test through your local extension office. This will tell you if your soil is acidic or alkaline. The proper ph level is vital in growing healthy plants.

Adding compost or other soil amendments enrich the soil and help with drainage issues. Effective amendments include but are not limited to worm castings, potting soil, peat moss, fine pine bark, packaged manure, sand, and compost. It is best to be sure any amendment you add to your soil has been properly aged (example, no new manure, etc.) In some cases, a combination of amendments produces the best results. Layer the amendment(s) up to 4" on top of the ground to be tilled to start with and keep working the soil until you have the desired effect. Listed below are the above mentioned amendments with some of their benefits:

- 1) Worm castings – nutrient rich, adds healthy bacteria and microorganisms, helps retain moisture.
- 2) Potting soil – Ideal for container gardening but can be mixed in your garden to help break up clay soil.
- 3) Peat moss –Retains moisture, breaks up compacted soil (clay, etc.), low in nutrients but has acidic ph.
- 4) Fine pine bark (soil conditioner) – should be properly prepared (no large pieces), loosens compacted soil and adds key nutrients such as nitrogen, potassium and other minerals, acidic ph.
- 5) Packaged manure (cow, chicken, etc.) – helps soil structure and adds valuable nutrients.
- 6) Sand – loosens clay soil and improves drainage.
- 7) Compost (garden, mushroom, etc.) – should be properly aged, very fertile, improves soil structure in both clay and loose soils, helps with drainage.

Adding compost, worm castings, or similar amendments to your established beds helps to keep the plants healthy by restoring necessary nutrients in the soil.

Do I need to mulch my beds? Mulching your beds properly can help retain moisture, cut down on weeds and enrich your soil. As a general rule, 2-3" of mulch is sufficient but there are always exceptions. Care should be taken not to bury the crowns of plants – give the plants a little room where they emerge from the ground. Also some plants thrive in hot dry conditions and less mulch is needed. Also be aware that there are different kinds of mulch and they might affect the ph level as they decompose. Mulching with rock or other kind of stone material could still change the ph level. Some research into the best kind for your garden may be needed. Consider finding a mulch that appeals to you and do some research as to how long it lasts and if it can change the ph level of your soil as it decomposes.