

Part Three

Sustainable Landscapes

Preparing the Planting Beds

Our last two articles on sustainable landscape defined it and gave ideas about how to develop a plan for your particular landscape. Next comes how to prepare a planting bed to make it sustainable. The most important step to a successful garden is preparing the planting bed. Ask the question, "Can the soil in the existing bed sustain plant growth?" Or, "Does the soil need specific help?" It is worth the time and expense is small to get your soil tested. The Ag Extension Office has kits for soil testing. Call 940-659-1228.

All planting areas are helped by adding compost to the existing soil. If you have sandy soil, the water and nutrients you add percolate too quickly through for the plant roots to absorb fully. If you have clay soil (it packs into a ball when you hold it in your hand), the clay prevents water and nutrients from percolating down to the plant roots in a sufficient amount. Water just stands or runs off. Compost is needed to make the soil friable. Compost is decomposed organic matter that is rich in nutrients and adds structure to the soil. Compost provides food for the plants and helps soil retain needed amounts moisture and air.

You can buy compost or make it yourself. It is basically a recycling of food scraps (no meat) and plant materials that have been decomposed (broken down) to where the original components are no longer recognizable. Finished compost should smell like soil and be crumbly to the touch. Compost will allow soils to hold on to the moisture and nutrients in the soil and not wash away. Compost provides a slow release nitrogen fertilizer for the plants. Add three or four inches of compost to the soil and work it in.

Another key step in preparing your planting beds is mulch. Mulch is added after you have planted the beds. The two types of mulch are organic and inorganic. Inorganic mulches are rocks, gravel, pebbles, etc. Organic mulches are those made from former living things. Examples are hard wood chips, shredded cedar, and cottonseed hulls. Use three or four inches of organic mulch on your planting area. It will decompose slowly over time and add nitrogen to the soil. You will need to add an inch of organic mulch in Spring and then again in the Fall. It will protect the roots from freezing in the Winter. All mulch helps to retain moisture in the soil and eliminates the need to water as frequently.

Layers of newspapers are a great gardening tool. If starting a new bed, put nine layers of newspaper at the bottom of the bed and put the soil and compost on top of the paper and then plant. The newspaper will block weeds and grass from coming up through the soil. If it an existing flower bed, put the layers of newspaper down after the bed has been planted and before you put the mulch on. The newspaper will act as a weed block and it will decompose over time.

Learn more about gardening by attending our seminar on Saturday, February 20th in Palo Pinto. Call 940-659-1228 for more details.

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