



SOIL: BORING SUBJECT..?

Soil: No glamour, no color and worst of all no drive-by "wow!"s. All this is true, but it is also true of the foundation of your home. Soil is the pivotal foundation of your garden. When you ask a successful gardener – "What do you wish someone had told you before you started gardening?" – over and over the answer is the importance of soil. I am a self-confessed soil freak. For me a successful gardening experience is the sight of my "plant guests" quietly dining on my soil. Much like a proud chef laying out a banquet for people she loves.

Gardening is such a physical task, sometimes I don't take time to stop and enjoy the results of my labor. As I mature as a person, and as a gardener, I force myself to stop, to listen, look, taste and feel. I see my plant guests quietly growing, attracting beautiful pollinators, producing seed babies, dying and becoming food for future diners. So slow, so fast, so many fed...bugs, birds, human eyes.

"Life goes on within us and without us." George Harrison

In nature, the system works because organic matter is being added to the soil all the time. Something dies and another life form uses it to be all it can be. In our gardens, this means if you rake off everything you must return something.

When I was a child, my mom, who grew up on a farm, often spoke of the magic of soil. She always had great reverence for soil's importance. This was a powerful setup for me; so, when my fourth grade teacher showed a filmstrip about making soil, I was riveted! The filmstrip showed the class how to combine rotten wood, sand and water. Then to prove to the fourth grade class that it was really soil they planted bean seeds in it, and they sprouted! I could make SOIL. I felt like a God! Of course, by the time the misstatements in the filmstrip became evident to me, I was hooked.

What was wrong with the filmstrip; you may ask. The demonstration was really about making "soilless mix." (Some ironic content in that fact.) Seeds, especially bean seeds, will sprout in any warm moist place. The filmstrip mix would have provided little more than an anchoring place for the bean roots. As the term soilless mix implies it has no soil in it. Do not get me wrong...soilless is not bad, in fact it is the best choice for containers, houseplants and greenhouse growing. Soilless mix has almost no nutrition in it, so you must regularly add fertilizer. Soilless mix has no life in it. No worms, no bugs, no seeds, no fungus...which is best for indoor culture because there we need to control all the factors like bugs, molds, and nutrition.

Outdoors in the garden we want and truly need LIFE in our soil. The difference between soilless mix and soil...is life. When you hold good garden soil in your hands you cannot see most of the life, but it is there. Very powerfully there. Most of it is microscopic life. These tiny life forms make soil as a byproduct of their life. All we need to do is to learn that this life needs organic matter, air, and water to do their work.

I am often asked if you must compost organic matter before using it in the garden. The good news is, no. As a matter of fact 95% of my composting is done in place on paths and in the spaces between plants. I can still remember when I was at a garden gathering years ago complaining about the amount of work and time it took, not to mention the damage done when raking the mulch off my true lilies. An older gardener said, "Why do you do that? Just let them come up through the mulch." I thought, will that work? It did. The forest mulches with leaves every year and no one rakes. It works. It works because the soil life works up into the mulch and eats it...and makes soil for you.

So, do I make soil ? Sadly the answer is no. Only soil can make soil. But I can put the ingredients in place. I guess, for me, the soil microbes are the fairies I wanted to interact with as a child. It feels right that my fairies make natural plant food and soil out of my mulch.

Something I want to emphasize that was mentioned in my 'famous' filmstrip is SAND. Sand is just very small rocks. Sand is actually a wonderful place to start because it should be the first thing you add to a garden area. I add 1/3 of my soil volume, or a six-inch layer, which is worked into the existing soil. Sand is heavy but cheap and once added does not need to be added again. Think of it – a gardening job you can have over and done with forever! Sand makes everything work better and easier. Weeds pull out much more easily. Sand promotes the movement of air and water in and through the soil. Sand fights soil compaction. All this helps the life in the soil to process the organic matter thus producing loam. The dictionary defines loam as: "loose-textured Soil consisting of a mixture of sand and clay containing organic matter." So, even the much-hated clay is important.

You will find that advice on soil amendments and types of mulches varies widely. In fact books are written full of advice. Do not worry about it. My experience of over thirty years shows me that anywhere I have put sand in good amounts really makes gardening easier...(at least after you get the sand put down.) Also, if anyone ever tells you that sand makes your soil into concrete...laugh at them!

Finally, I cannot answer everything about soil because I do not know everything. Luckily, we do not have to know everything. Remember, it is a very forgiving system, with a great deal of wisdom built into it. Use your powers of observation and common sense. Please make your piece of the planet the best you can. Know that there will be quiet help.

Loam was not built in a day.

Sharon Nelson-Vaux
Altoona, IA