



Urban Harvest

Make Plans until Polar Vortex Stays Polar

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It's been a roller-coaster winter - long johns one day and T-shirts the next. Usually our last fear-of-frost day is mid-February. Roses are traditionally cut back on Valentine's Day. This year we may want to wait a bit to ensure the polar vortex is back where it belongs. In the meantime, kick off the 2014 growing season by doing a little planning.

Your garden's success depends on the health of your soil. Over and over, successful gardeners say, "Don't put a \$10 plant in a 50-cent hole." Many garden problems begin with the soil; poor drainage, nutritional deficiencies, insects and diseases all can be a result of imbalances in the soil.

The only way to know what you need is to know what you have. The [Texas Agrilife Extension Service](#) has detailed instructions on how to take a soil sample and can analyze your sample. Visit soiltesting.tamu.edu for a submission form and instructions. There are a number of other soil-testing laboratories that will test your sample.

Use the same lab each time you have your soil tested since each lab may have a different method of testing for certain properties. Changing labs will make it difficult to monitor your results over time. Once you have received the results, you can follow the lab's recommendations for amending your soil.



Healthy soils and proper plant selection are key to a successful garden. Native and well-adapted plants such as gaillardias, lantanas, salvias and verbenas ensure dazzling color through summer's sizzling heat.

Most soils in our area lack sufficient organic material. Incorporating a 5- to 6-inch layer of organic matter when preparing new planting beds will improve drainage, improve mineral and nutrient retention, and foster microorganism growth and activity.

Compost is a great way to increase organic matter. The essential microorganisms that help maintain healthy soils feed on this organic matter. These microorganisms, and there are millions in each handful of soil, perform several key functions, processing unusable materials in the soil into beneficial substances, fighting off destructive diseases, building vigorous roots, and changing soil texture to allow for better air and moisture movement.

Also, organic mulch is one of the best topdressings you can use to encourage healthy plantings. Nutrients are added to the soil as the mulch decays, weeds are discouraged from sprouting, erosion is checked, moisture is conserved and soil temperature is regulated by the mulch's insulating properties.

Today, even die-hard users of synthetic garden products are realizing that organic methods can lower costs; reduce chemical usage; provide a safer place for pets and children to play; and encourage birds, butterflies and other wildlife to make their garden home.

Humate is a natural by-product of composting. For quicker results, or where it is not possible to incorporate compost, such as established plantings, adding Humate in the form of Leonardite will help. Humate increases the amount of available carbon (a necessary building block of all life), helps balance pH, makes existing minerals more available and promotes strong root growth. Zeolite is another natural mineral deposit and helps improve drainage and increases beneficial fungi and microbes.



Organic fertilizers release their nutrients slowly and hence, plants are able to make better use of them. Many synthetic fertilizers provide more nutrients than can be used by the plant and the excess is washed into storm sewers and accounts for one of the largest non-point source pollutants. Strong synthetic fertilizers also can harm the beneficial microorganisms in your soil. Organic fertilizers are derived from plant or animal by-products and contain trace elements that most synthetic fertilizers do not.

After building up your soil, choosing the plants appropriate to your

needs and existing conditions is the most important thing you can do to achieve a healthy garden. A sun-loving plant growing in the shade or a shade-loving plant in the sun will lead to poor growth, insect and disease problems, and disappointment.

Choosing native or well-adapted plants will give you better results than using plants not acclimated to our Gulf Coast weather extremes. Some perennial favorites such as purple coneflower, black-eyed Susan, Gaillardia daisy and numerous salvias provide almost year-round color with little effort.

By choosing your plants wisely and faithfully tending to the needs of your garden's soil, you can promote a strong healthy garden that will reward you with fruit and flower in excess of your expectations.



This column is produced by Urban Harvest. Learn about gardening classes, community gardens and orchards, farmers' markets and more at www.urbanharvest.org.