



Feed Your Soil!

Almost any gardening question is answered with some reference to building healthy soil because it is the foundation of any vegetable garden and building nutrient rich soil will provide a bounty of fresh, nutritious food and a productive, pest-free garden.

Anyone can build great soil regardless of what you start with – clay or sand, pebbles or shale. After a soil test has confirmed the absence of lead or other heavy metals, the addition of organic matter begins. For the average home or community gardener, cultivating a relatively small patch of land, soil building is crucial to the success of your garden. With limited room to rotate your crops, the same soil is intensively cultivated year after year, depleting the nutrients and leaving little behind for the earthworms and soil microorganisms to live on. When soil nutrients are limited, microbes will take up what little is there, leaving none for the plants. By adding organic matter, you are feeding both your soil and your plants.

Your soil's ability to retain both moisture and oxygen is greatly improved with the addition of organic matter. And you're literally injecting life into your garden by adding a multitude of beneficial microorganisms. Some of these organisms "fix" nitrogen in the soil making it available to plants in a readily useful form. Others manufacture antibiotics that protect your plants from disease. Using pesticides in your garden eliminates these beneficial organisms and leaves you with lifeless, nutrient-poor soil.

Our community gardens are managed organically and the use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers is not allowed. One big reason for this is the tremendous toxicity that would occur from 10 different pesticides being used by 10 different gardeners in an area as small as a community garden. Besides, many garden pests and diseases are easily avoided by building healthy soil with lots of organic matter instead of pouring chemicals on a problem *after* it occurs and *hoping* it works.

Chemical fertilizers such as Miracle-Gro are also prohibited in our community gardens because they have no soil-building attributes. Soluble chemical fertilizers provide plants with a "quick fix" and that's about it. They have no long-lasting benefits or slow release of nutrients like you get from using bone meal or a well-balanced organic fertilizer.

So go ahead and feed your soil. Fatten up those earthworms with a healthy diet of leaves, compost, and manure, and be sure to serve a nice helping of organic fertilizer for dessert. Providing nourishment for your soil will ensure many delicious rewards from your garden.
