

Product Spotlight:

Black Gold All Purpose Potting Soil

This nutrient-rich blend of Canadian Sphagnum peat moss, earthworm castings, compost and perlite/pumice is ideal for house plants, patio containers or hanging baskets. It provides superior moisture retention and excellent drainage and is specially formulated with a controlled release fertilizer to feed plants for up to six months.

Applications:

Use in hanging baskets, container planting or high-heat planting areas for wonderful results.

Begonias:

Winter begonias are varieties with fancy leaves and some small flowers. The leaves are breathtaking to look at, because the markings and colors on the leaves are marvelous. If you pick off the flowers, the leaves will get bigger and more colorful.

Most begonias are grown as houseplants; they come from tropical regions of the country. There are numerous new varieties that are grown for outdoor use, but they can grow indoors for a short time. Knowing this, you must keep these plants warm indoors, or grow them outside during the summer. Indoors during the winter, the begonia will thrive if you use grow lights on it, but they are not necessary. These fancy-leaf begonias love high humidity, so place them on plastic saucers filled with small stones. Fill the tray every morning--the water will evaporate during the day, helping the plant grow better. I have found that misting of the foliage will cause spotting of the foliage and may cause powdery mildew; this detracts from their looks. If you use a humidifier in the house keep them close by.

Water plants as needed. Keep moist from May to September and on the dry side during the winter. Fertilize begonias year round with a fertilizer like Miracle-Gro or Blooming and Rooting Plant Food. The stems are fleshy, so be sure to use a well-drained potting soil. Heavy soils will rot the stems. Select a location in your home that has no drafts from windows or doors. Temperature-wise, begonias need to be 65 degrees plus all year long. When the plant is exposed to temperatures below 55 degrees it will be chilled and the leaves will begin to fall from the plant.

Begonias do not like to be moved often around your house. Find a spot for them, then leave them alone and let them stay put. Begonias do not need to be repotted often. They grow better in smaller pots, so be sure the pot they are in is filled with roots like a spider web before you move them. When repotting, use a man-made soil or a lightweight artificial soil. When you over-pot in large pots, the plants can suffer from overwatering and root rot more easily. Never push down hard on the newly potted soil or you will squeeze the air out of it. Think soft and fluffy when repotting and the plant will thrive.

Begonias need moderate light during the summer, so place them in a east or west window. During the winter, a south-facing window is best--or place them under grow lights. Fertilizer is necessary during the growing season May to September. The plant should usually be fertilized every 2 weeks, except during the winter, when you should fertilize only once a month. Use a balanced fertilizer like Miracle-Gro or Blooming and Rooting Plant Food. If yellow spots develop on the leaves, remove them and clean the plant. Do not crowd begonias by putting other plants around them; give them room to grow and leave space around them for better air circulation.

The best varieties for the winter are the 'Iron Cross' or 'Rex' begonias. Leaf color ranges from numerous shades of green to silver, pink, red and gold. The leaves can be smooth, ruffled, spotted, and almost puckered. Some of the varieties look like stained glass windows. The flowers are small and several on hanging stems, pink in color--but the foliage is why you grow the plant. With a little care, plants should last several years in your home. Moving them outside for the summer and back indoors in the fall is not good for them as they have a problem adjusting to the growing conditions.

Window Sill:

The month of January is my most depressing month for gardening projects. The holidays are over and the house that was once filled with decorations, fresh greens, and plants is now cleaned out--leaving an almost empty look to our windows and plant-growing areas. So how do we break out of the winter blues? First of all get out of your chair and stop feeling sorry for yourself. Spring is now less than 60 days away and each day is getting longer, with the sun is getting higher in the sky. Think positive!

Here is what I want you to do. Go to your local garden center, hardware or feed and grain store, purchase a bag of potting soil or seed starter soil and fill 4 inch pots with saucers or narrow window boxes with this soil. Place them on your windowsills or plant-growing tables. January is the perfect time to start planting fresh herbs from seed that can be enjoyed indoors during the next several months of winter, and later transplanted to the garden for summer and fall enjoyment.

These fresh-grown windowsill herbs will add wonderful flavor to your salads, vegetables, and the meals you will be cooking as the herbs mature in the next 4 to 6 weeks. In the meantime, you will enjoy watching these seeds germinate and begin to grow on the windowsill giving you hope and encouragement that spring is just around the corner.

I also plant what I call my "Cut and Come Again" windowsill garden this month. The garden is made up the same type of container as I plant my herbs in--but I plant seed of leafy lettuce, leeks, onions, and unusual green such as cress, arugula, bok choy, kale, collards, spinach, Swiss chard, and kale. All these greens will mature in 4 to 6 weeks and can be cut to an inch from the soil line when you want to harvest. Then fertilize the plants, and in just 4 weeks they will be ready to cut again and harvest a new crop. Check the seed racks for seed packets when you're purchasing your soil and pots this month. Sometimes just seeing something green growing on the windowsill can help to bring you out of the winter blues!

If you have a wide and large windowsill, use regular window boxes or pots 6 to 10 inches wide and plant dwarf peas, bush beans, or even a container of miniature tomatoes or peppers. When they begin to flower, you will have to tickle the flower with an artist type paint brush to stimulate pollination and move the pollen around on the flower to develop fruit on the plant.

When you first plant your seeds, cover the seed trays with a sheet of plastic wrap to help hold moisture around the seeds; this will create a miniature greenhouse, helping to sprout seeds faster and more efficiently. I place a few toothpicks over the seed trays to keep the plastic wrap off the soil; this helps air movement as the seedlings first develop and helps prevent disease problems early on. Water as needed to keep soil moist at all times. I use a mister when watering to prevent the seeds from being washed too deeply into the soil with the water I add. Remove the plastic covering when you think that half or more of the seedlings are developing. I do not fertilize plants until the first true leaves begin to develop in the next couple of weeks. Fertilize seedlings every 2 weeks at half strength and water as needed when plants develop true leaves.

If you would like to add fresh crunch to salads, sandwiches, and stir fry, how about growing your own sprouts this winter. It's easy, quick and fun--and best of all, the fresh crunchy taste will give your winter cooking new character. Sprouts are easy and can be ready in as little as 2 to 4 days. All you will need are some of the seeds that I recommend and a large jar with a perforated lid.

Begin by washing the jars well, add the seeds and rinse seeds well with cold water. Now fill the jar about a third full of water to allow room for the seeds to grow. Once the seeds germinate and begin to grow, the roots and stems will develop and begin to fill the jar. Now fill the jar with warm water and leave it to soak for 6 to 12 hours. Drain the jar thoroughly and put in a well-ventilated area in the kitchen that is out of direct sunlight. Rinse the seeds a couple of times each day to prevent them from drying out completely and to keep them fresh. Once the seeds develop to the size you prefer, place them in a refrigerator to prevent further growth until you're ready to use them.

Seeds to use are:

Peas and beans are crunchy and they take 2 to 4 days to sprout.

Aduki beans are slightly sweet and have red skin with short white sprouts and are ready in 2 to 4 days.

Alfalfa is a favorite, because of its mild nutty flavor and crispy shoots.

Broccoli is high in antioxidants and also has a bold brassica taste. Broccoli is best when the sprouts are mixed with other sprouts for a more interesting taste.

Mung beans: Are sprouted in the dark for 4-5 days for the traditional large Chinese bean sprouts--or enjoy them when they are younger--2 to 3 days--in salads or soups.

Don't complain about the weather outside when you can garden with fresh herbs and vegetables indoors on your windowsill during the month of January. Enjoy!

In The Garden During January!

Right now your soil is dormant and the vegetable and the annual flower garden is empty of plants, making it the perfect time to prepare it for the coming year. Whether your garden has snow cover over it or not, let's use the next few weeks to build a layer of organic matter over the garden. The secret to a good garden soil is organic matter to help break down the clay in your soil--or to help hold moisture in the soil if your soil is sandy. Organic matter not only helps with moisture retention but it helps to hold the fertilizer you add to the garden during the year; root development is encouraged and your plants will develop stronger stems and foliage to produce the best flowers or vegetables possible.

What can you add to your garden this winter to improve your garden soils for the spring? While the ground is frozen, it is a good time to have a truckload of animal manure delivered to the garden if the truck has to drive over your lawn. Frozen ground will eliminate those ruts that the truck tires will make in the lawn with the weight of the manure in the truck. Just spread it over the garden evenly. In the spring, work it into the soil once it thaws--you're now ahead of the next season. You can add as much as 2 to 3 inches of seasoned or year-old animal manure over the garden at this time of the year. I would also add 50 pounds of powdered limestone per 500 square feet of garden area--right on top of the animal manure--to help sweeten the soil when you till it in the spring. If you have a wood stove, add a 5 gallon bucket of wood ash over the same area.

If your local nursery or garden center has compost available by the yard, it can also be added at this time of the year--right on top of the garden instead of the animal manure. I love to use compost in the garden, because of the texture of the product--and unlike even seasoned animal manure, there is little to no smell. Compost can be made of any type of organic product or combination of products to help rebuild your soil. Compost has the ability to retain moisture for your plants during those hot dry days of summer and if you live in an area where "water bands" are common, adding compost to the garden will become a must if you want a productive garden.

Compost will also act like a sponge to hold the fertilizer in your soil and the fertilizers you add to those soils during the growing season. Compost will also create an environment in the soil to help build colonies of microbes, bacteria, and fungi that will benefit your plants during the growing season. Compost will also encourage earthworm activity in your soils, something that most of us rarely see. Now think of it...when was the last time you dug in your garden and saw earthworms? As a child I remember digging in my father's garden for worms so I could go fishing; can you do that in your garden today?

Straw is another wonderful type of organic matter that you can add to your garden soil to improve its quality. Straw is weed-free, and is made up of hollow tubes of grass that can decompose more quickly than hay products. Because of the lack of weed seed, you're preventing problems in the garden, so please be sure to ask for STRAW and stay away from HAY as a soil conditioner. Hay can be used in the garden, if it has been composted before you add it to your garden soil. During the composting, heat will build up in the pile and kill the seeds of the weeds present in the hay mixture. Hay is what grows in a field, a combination of grasses and natural weeds native to the area--great for feeding horses, wonderful to spread on an open area where you want to prevent erosion problems, but not for a garden.

Leaves and pine needles are another type of organic matter that will create a wonderful source for conditioning your soils. Many of us rake the leaves and pine needles then bag them for disposal in the land fill--but this type of organic matter, when blended with your soil, will create a wonderful environment for our soil microbes, earthworms and more. I have always used my leaves in the garden and to help speed up the process. What I do is to rake the leaves, bring them to the garden and grinding them up with the lawn mower. The sharp blades of the mower will shred up the leaves quickly into small pieces so you can easily mix them with the soil and the colonies of microbes living there can break them down faster to make the nutrition available to your plants.

Grass clippings, collected from your lawn during the year, are another wonderful source of organic matter for your garden, as a mulch or soil conditioner. A couple things for you to remember when you use grass clippings--if you're using a lawn weed control product such as a "weed and feed" or crabgrass preventer, avoid using the clipping for the next couple of mowings, so the weed killers have a chance to break down in the plant. Also, in the fall of the year, if you have crabgrass in your lawn and you see those red seed heads forming in the lawn, avoid adding this to the garden or you could spread the crabgrass seed to the garden.

During the winter months, we traditionally have more stormy weather, and if you live near the seashore these storms will bring seaweed onto the beaches. Seaweed is my favorite form of raw organic matter. Once you begin to use seaweed in your garden you will see a quick improvement to the quality of your soil and the plants that grow there. Seaweed is like using peat moss in the garden to rebuild the soil but there is a big advantage to seaweed over peat moss--and that is the nutritional value of the seaweed. All of the goodness of the ocean is found in the seaweed, and when added to the garden you receive the organic matter of the seaweed and all of the nutrition from the ocean. Growing up along the coast, I always added seaweed to the garden every year and every year I noticed improvements in the quality of my garden plants.

I started to use seaweed because the garden soil was only 3 to 4 inches deep and the subsoil was sandy, so I spent many hours watering the garden. I started adding seaweed during the winter to the garden and tilling it into the soil in the spring and created a rich, deep, and healthy soil. After a coastal storm I would head to the beach and collect the seaweed and just spread it over the garden. Today, after many years of doing this, my garden soil is well over a foot deep, I have hundreds of earthworms living in the soil, and I water the garden weekly if needed. Something else

I noticed about the garden after adding seaweed was that I needed to fertilize less and had better production from the garden. My seeds seem to germinate faster, the plants matured earlier, and I had fewer problems with disease and insects on the plants.

This winter, put a box of strong trash bags in your car and head to the beach to collect the free seaweed that washes ashore with the winter storms. Soil quality is the answer to your garden's productivity, and seaweed will make a big difference in improving that quality. If you find a spot where broken clams and sea shells are available, collect them also and spread them in the garden for the nutrition they contain. Just because it is winter it does not mean you should hibernate indoors. Get out and collect organic matter for the garden now, while you have time, for a better garden this summer. Spring is less than 60 days away now, so use your time wisely for a better garden this year.

Paul Parent will be hosting a tour that includes:

Vancouver, BC

- Butchart Gardens--55 acres of floral display!
- Cruising the Inside Passage:
- Ketchikan
- Icy Strait Point
- Juneau
- Skagway
- Hubbard Glacier Cruising
- Seward
- Scenic Drive to Anchorage
- Denali National Park
- Fairbanks City Tour, a tour of the Gold Dredge # 8 and a cruise down the Chena river on the Riverboat Discovery Sternwheeler.

Trivia

This Week's Question

You have probably seen numbers written on a fertilizer container, such as 10-10-10. What elements from the periodic table of elements do these numbers represent?

- A. Y-H-O
- B. I-B-C
- C. W-O-H
- D. N-P-K
- E. V-F-

This Week's Prize:

Bio-tone® Starter Plus

All Natural Plant Food Enhanced with Bacteria and Mycorrhizae

- Microbe-enhanced all natural plant food
- Includes both endo and ecto mycorrhizae
- Grows larger root mass to help plants establish fast
- Promotes bigger blooms
- Reduces transplant loss

One winner per question - we choose winners from the list of those who answer correctly. Winners must be newsletter subscribers. We'll ship you your prize, so be sure to put your address in the form in case you win!

FEATURED RECIPE:

Winter Minestrone



What You'll Need:

- 1/3 pound sliced pancetta, chopped
 - 3 medium red onions, chopped
 - 4 celery ribs, chopped
 - 2 medium carrots, chopped
 - 1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil
 - 1 bunch Swiss chard
 - 6 garlic cloves, finely chopped
 - 1 teaspoon salt
 - 3/4 teaspoon pepper
 - 2 tablespoons tomato paste
 - 1 (28-ounce) can whole tomatoes in juice
 - 3 quart hot water
 - 5 cups coarsely chopped cored Savoy cabbage (6 ounces)
 - 5 cups coarsely chopped escarole (1/2 pound)
 - 1 piece Parmigiano-Reggiano rind (about 3 by 1 1/2 inches)
 - 1 (19-ounce) can cannellini beans, rinsed and drained
- *Accompaniments:* extra-virgin olive oil for drizzling; cooked Ditalini pasta tossed with oil (optional), or grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

Step by Step:

- Cook pancetta, onions, celery, and carrots in oil in a wide 7-to 9-quart heavy pot over medium heat, stirring occasionally, while preparing chard.
- Cut out stems from chard and chop stems, reserving leaves.
- Stir chard stems into pancetta mixture with garlic, 1 teaspoon salt, and 3/4 teaspoon pepper and continue cooking, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are very tender and begin to stick to bottom of pot, about 45 minutes total. (Set aside chard leaves.)
- Push vegetables to one side of pot. Add tomato paste to cleared area and cook, stirring constantly, until it starts to caramelize, about 2 minutes.
- Stir paste into vegetables and cook, stirring, 2 minutes. (Paste may stick to pot, but don't let it burn.)
- Stir in tomatoes with their juice, breaking them up with a spoon, then add hot water (3 quarts), scraping up any brown bits from bottom of pot.
- Bring to a simmer. Stir in cabbage, escarole, and parmesan rind. Simmer, covered, until greens are tender, about 40 minutes.
- Coarsely chop chard leaves and stir into soup along with beans.
- Simmer, partially covered, 10 minutes. Discard rind.
- Season soup with salt and pepper. If using Ditalini, stir in just before serving.

Yield: 8 servings