

Healthy Soil and Healthy Landscapes

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When I learned Coastal Grower was going to do an issue focused on healthy living, I couldn't help but want to focus on healthy soil. You see, soil is an area of gardening and landscaping I'm especially passionate about. I studied soil at Cal Poly and some argue that the Roman civilization failed thanks to improper management of soil. Either way, I thought I would share a few tips on keeping things green through proper care of our most important "dirty" resource.

Few people understand the time it takes to generate soil in nature. Just an inch of soil can take more than 10,000 years to come about. This is precisely why steep slope farming and construction susceptible to erosion is closely regulated. A number of environmental factors such as climate, topography, plant life and geology will determine how fast and rich soil will come to bear. Here in Salinas much of our valley floor features some of the best soil on earth. Our growers know this.

For those of us that don't benefit from rich soil in our garden, there is a number of resources we can turn to. First, I always recommend you get your soil tested. You have the option to pay for soil testing or get it done for free. I perform very basic soil testing at my nursery for free. I simply ask that clients provide their name, address and phone number along with a gallon size zip lock bag with a "representative sample" of dirt from their property. By representative, I ask folks to dig 9 inches in several locations, combine samples in a bucket, mix and give me a portion. Those folks that test their soil, know exactly what they are working with.

Whether you are testing or not, I've got some of the most common challenges gardeners and landscapers face paired with solutions as follows:

TIRED SOIL: This is common. Folks have never fertilized or amended and their landscape is showing signs of death, pests and disease. I always tell guests at my nursery that healthy soil produces healthy plants. I recommend amending with high quality compost and organic fertilizer.

CLAY SOIL: I see dozens of folks every weekend in the spring that suffer from high clay soil. You must add compost to break it up. You should be adding some every season. I also recommend Gypsum. Gypsum works at a microscopic level to actually separate sheets of clay particles to allow for nutrient availability and water passage.

SANDY SOIL: Sandy soil simply needs a good supply of organic matter to hold water and bring life to the root zone of plants. Like with clay soil, clients are advised to amend & fertilize at least once every spring when the plants need the nutrition most.

You're picking up on the theme that the secret to healthy plants is minding what is going on in the root zone. While gardeners a generation ago came to discover and believe in Miracle Grow, today's enthusiasts are turning to natural based solutions.

If you are not composting now, you should consider it. If it's not a possibility, I strongly recommend you invest in high quality organic matter from your favorite independent nursery. Some of my "go to's" include Master Nursery Gold Rush and Master Nursery Black Forest. I'd also recommend a high quality organic fertilizer. These should be applied in the spring going into the time of year when plants need it most.

Gardening and landscaping can be so easy if we pay attention to the basics. Soil is one of those basics. I invite you to get your soil tested and wish for a lush landscape this landscape thanks to amending and fertilizing.

Steve McShane Biography (Revised 7-14)

Steve McShane is Owner & General Manager of McShane's Nursery & Landscape Supply in Salinas, California. He has a b.s. in Soil Science from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and an M.B.A. from Santa Clara. He serves on the Salinas City Council. When not working, he loves hiking, traveling to far reaches of the planet and experimenting with exotic fruits. He can be reached at steve@mcshanesnursery.com.