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## Getting down to earth

**Pioneering organic gardener Charles Dowding explains how important it is to know what sort of soil you're dealing with and the effect it can have on your yields**

Soil is as much alive as you and me and it repays treating it with that in mind; think biology as much as chemistry. Compost and well-rotted manures contain organic matter (bacteria, fungi and fauna) in the form of humus, which is the key to successful growing. It holds together in lumps which retain moisture and air, and provides food for soil inhabitants. Increasing the organic matter content of topsoil is a gardener's most important and enduring work.

### What soil do you have?

Soils with fine particles such as clay and silt are among the most fertile. They are also the most difficult to work as they turn sticky in winter and hard in summer. Keeping organic matter on top can help. Lighter soils with sand and gravel require plenty of humus because it retains rainfall. In between these two extremes are loamy soils, whose range of particle sizes tends to make it easier to create a rich tilth.

There are several ways of identifying your own soil. First, dig a hole as deep as the blade of your spade and examine your soil's profile. The topsoil is the fertile soil in which most of your plant roots will grow. Ideally, the layer of topsoil should be a spit deep. If not, bulk it up with rich compost.

## Top tips for making the perfect compost

For a certain breed of gardener, composting is a competitive sport. But for most of us, composting means chucking potato peelings and grass cuttings on a heap every now and then, and eventually prodding about in the bottom to see if nature has taken its course. And it always does, in the end. But nobody - perfectionist or slacker - wants a stinking slimy mess at the end of their garden, so here are several ways to improve your compost without the horticultural gymnastics.

- Get the ratio of soft and woody ingredients about equal. Soft stuff is sappy green growth, grass clippings, tea bags and vegetable peelings. Woody stuff is prunings and clippings, egg cartons and screwed up newspaper.
- The impatient can add activators (urine or farmyard manure) to

speed things up.

- Leave out cooked food, dairy or meat scraps, as they will attract rats.
- Perennial weeds and annual weeds that have set seed will just spread through the compost and then through your garden. Leave these out.
- Turn the heap occasionally to mix ingredients and let air in. Fork everything out and back in again.
- If the heap feels dry, water lightly.
- Green manures are another way to add organic matter to your soil. Simply scatter them over the soil, let them grow a little, then dig them in. Lupin, buckwheat, fenugreek, crimson clover and mustard are particularly quick-growing.

*Compost Awareness Week takes place May 4-10. See [compostawarenessweek.org.uk](http://compostawarenessweek.org.uk) for composting activities in your area.*

**Lia Leendertz**

Next, grab a handful of soil, squeeze it into a ball and see how it responds. If it crumbles, your soil is sandy. If it's almost impossible to break and makes your hand dirty, it's clay. If it's between the two, it's loamy.

Another key quality is soil pH. You can buy pH meters or litmus paper to check your own soil, or try some local detective work. If soil in your area is acidic, there will be rhododendrons, axaleas, camellias and blue hydrangeas. If it's alkaline, you should see a lot of poppies, and hydrangeas will be pink, not blue. You can still grow most vegetables in either case but just beware of certain preferences.

### Don't dig for victory

Vegetable growing has traditionally involved digging or rotovating the soil. Some gardeners enjoy this winter work but it is not obligatory for bountiful, healthy crops.

The no-dig approach is based on the idea that long-term digging is bad for the structure of the earth (and for your back). It's amazingly

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simple to adopt a no-dig policy in your own garden, particularly if you're working raised beds (*see page 60*). Simply hoe out the weeds in autumn and spread a thick layer of mulch over the surface of the soil to encourage the earthworms to keep busy aerating the earth below. Areas of grass or densely growing annual weeds can simply be mulched with a layer of cardboard underneath the compost.

In March 2007 I created four raised beds (2.5m x 1.5m) on an area of clay soil. All four beds received the same 5cm of horse manure and 10cm of green waste compost. In the two dug beds, the organic matter was incorporated into the soil, whereas in the two undug beds, the organic matter was simply spread on top.

The overall yield of vegetables in 2007 was 49.3kg from the two dug beds and 54.2kg from the undug beds. Evidently, no-dig gardening can achieve the same positive results as digging without the backbreaking work. I have practised this for 25 years and find that my crops have improved year after year.

*Charles Dowding is the author of Organic Gardening the Natural, No Dig Way and Salad Leaves for All Seasons (Green Books). For more information and courses on vegetable growing see [charlesdowding.co.uk](http://charlesdowding.co.uk)*