

Caution Gardeners!

Black Dirt Isn't Always Black Dirt: The Importance of Soil Tests

Do you know what's sitting in your garden under your flowers and vegetables? Chances are you don't. Knowing the type of soil you have in your garden is the most important step to making your garden beautiful and productive. Ideally, it is best to have a soil test performed before the soil is even transported to your garden. The most effective soil for your garden will have the nutrients and composition required for the types of plants you plan to grow.

How do you know what type of soil you need and how do you know where to buy it? While all soil may look similar in color and composition, there are subtle differences that could make a huge difference in the success of your garden. Soil isn't just a mix of minerals, it is alive! A handful of soil from your garden contains millions of living organisms and must be

treated as a living substance.

A specialized landscaping or gardening center is the best place to buy soil. They employ professionals who should be able to direct you to the type of soil that will work best for

your purpose. However, it is important to only buy soil that has been tested and certified. According to Marty Long, President of Minnesota Mulch & Soil, "No standards are being applied to the soil industry. Landscapers are buying soil



Barb Kirkpatrick's gardens thrive with a special blend of mulch provided by Minnesota Mulch & Soil.



from suppliers without requiring soil tests. Where is this soil coming from? What is in this soil? The industry has changed. Contractors are trying to get rid of black soil from dredging projects which may be contaminated. Just because soil is black doesn't mean it's proper for garden use. There is no cost difference between good soil and poor soil, but poor soil could cost you a lot more in the long run. An experienced gardener should never buy soil without a soil report. A soil report will tell you that the soil you are purchasing is free of contaminants and has the organic foundations required for plant growth."

To emphasize the importance of soil tests, Long sighted an example of some soil that was presented to the University of Minnesota for testing prior to being used on a large construction project for the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT.) The soil appeared to be high quality, structured black soil with no distinctive smells. The soil report came back with a salt content of over 7% and a phosphorus content of approximately 1%. MnDOT, the contractor on the



Proper organic foundations in soil are essential for plant growth

project, rejected the soil because plants can't grow in soil with very little phosphorus, and a high salt content will kill most plant life. Where did this soil go after it was rejected by MnDOT? It is highly possible that it went to a landscaping or gardening center and was then sold for use on yards, playgrounds, or any other place soil is found. Calls to local landscaping and gardening centers in the Twin Cities metro area confirmed that these businesses are not requiring soil tests on the soil they receive. They trust their

suppliers to sell them quality soil.

The question gardeners should ask themselves is "If the soil isn't good enough for MnDOT ditches and boulevards, why would I want it in my yard? Sod, trees, bushes, annual and perennial flowers are very expensive. Why would I put them in poor quality, possibly toxic, soil?" Barb Kirkpatrick, a master gardener with beautiful perennial gardens in North Oaks, is very particular about what she puts in her gardens. "I never buy bagged soil because you don't





know what you're getting. It could be full of pathogens. I only buy mulch from a supplier I trust. The microorganisms in the mulch break down into a high quality soil."

MnDOT is becoming more particular about the quality of soil they use for their projects and has been using engineered soils designed specifically for an intended use. This discrimination is spilling over into the rest of the industry and, for the first time, certified soil will be available next spring in local gardening and landscaping centers. Reinhard Alexejew, owner of Baldwin Lake Perennials, is excited at the

prospect of offering certified soils to his customers. "This will be a valuable material from a retailer's perspective. We will market it as certified soil for educated gardeners."

It's not too late to improve the quality of your existing soil. If your garden is already in place and you are interested in making it more productive, the first place to begin is by requesting a Soil Test Report from the University of Minnesota. This is easy to do. The forms are online with instructions for obtaining a sample and a mailing address. The analysis costs between \$15 and \$70

depending on the number of tests requested. This report will tell you the fertility status of your soil and provide information to improve the mineral nutrition, such as the rates of fertilizer and lime to apply. What the report will not provide, however, is whether there are disease causing organisms, plant attacking insects, herbicide residues, or other contaminants.

If you are concerned about the quality or safety of the soil you are planning to purchase, request a soil report from your retailer. A quality report will do a complete soil analysis and provide suggestions for use which follow the guidelines established by MnDOT, the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, and the University of Minnesota Soil Test Laboratory. This analysis costs the buyer nothing. Minnesota Mulch & Soil and the University of Minnesota Soil Test Laboratory can also provide a listing of landscapers and retailers who can provide a soil report with the soil they offer for sale. To request this list or a soil analysis contact Minnesota Mulch & Soil at mnmulchsoil@comcast.net or the University of Minnesota Soil Test Laboratory.



The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) and Minnesota Mulch & Soil collaborated on a specialty soil being used on many MnDOT projects.

