

Confessions of a Lazy Gardener

Issue #5: Soil Preparation the Lazy Way

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Have you ever seen Dave and Delores Johnson's* place in the early spring? Where the annuals and vegetables will be going in, they have beautiful beds of perfectly-prepared soil. No wonder they get results.



If this sort of perfection intimidates you, please stop by my place at about the same time. You will see -- no sign of any activity at all. It would be embarrassing to anyone with a gardening conscience. I have learned to live with it.

I'm probably lucky, since I have pretty good soil to start with -- light, a little sandy, and I can get away with not doing a lot as long as I avoid plants that require "evenly moist conditions". No Trollius or bog plants on Dart Avenue.

But I do some soil preparation. It could be worse.

Since most of my gardens are stuffed with perennials, I end up doing a lot of top dressing. I rarely dig anything into the soil with a fork or spade -- partly because there isn't room, but mostly because I'm lazy. If I feel really ambitious, I might scratch things around with a little hoe. (I rarely feel really ambitious.) Once, I actually got my husband to dig in some amendments. That was a while ago.

1. Compost - homemade. It is a good thing that "compost happens", because I do very little to make it happen any faster or any better. I utilize a "FILO" system of composting: "First In, Last Out": I never turn it or aerate it or anything else like that.

Since I got my fine shredder*, I DO shred up the big stuff, like stems from the saplings in the hedge, verbena bonariensis, large weeds, cannas, etc. Shredding things allows compost to happen at all, although slowly. Does it end up looking like that great compost we saw at Archie Caple's* garden on tour last year? No. Is it better than nothing? I think so.

In the spring, I take out all the compost from my bins and spread it on the part of the garden that seems to need it most. The compost is usually still filled with noticeable sticks and stems, but I can live with this.

Oh -- one more thing: I compost vegetable scraps from the kitchen -- and sometimes the "scraps" are things like half a watermelon. It is NOT a good idea to put partially decayed fruit and vegetable items through the shredder. Don't ask why. Take my word for it. It's not pretty.

2. Compost from recycling sites. Always seems like a good idea. Those piles of rich black compost look great as I drive past them on the way to the golf course. I have almost never used them, even though I understand the compost is a lot better than it used to be, and you're much less likely to grow a big stand of thistles, nettles, purslane or quack grass. (I had to move after one experience with City compost in Minneapolis.)

3. Bags of stuff from garden stores. Having grown up on a farm, it seems very odd to buy manure. As a young girl, I never imagined that people in the city actually spent money for stuff that was -- er -- readily available. But so it is. I have to admit that I once picked up a few bags of manure when there was a sale on, but I'd never tell my cousins and uncles back in South Dakota. I'd never hear the end of it.

4. Depleted seed starting mix. I save all the used seed starting mix that accumulates during the transplanting/growing on process in the spring and spread it out in the gardens or put it into the compost. Although, come to think of it, I think I still have a bucket of used mix in the basement from LAST spring. Maybe it's time to get that out there. Since it has a lot of peat in it, I try to spread it around acid-loving plants like azaleas and roses. So far, I have not spread any horrible disease this way. Maybe this year will be the year....

I was going to go into how I don't do much when planting bulbs in the fall (I know it's a good time to add some bone meal); and how I miss a lot of opportunities to improve the soil when I transplant things (maybe a little peat moss now and then, but that's about it); and how I get night crawlers to do my composting and aerating, but this is long enough already, and I'll bore you with that another time.

* Sadly, Dave and Delores Johnson, Archie Caple and my leaf shredder are all deceased now. We miss them. (Though the neighbors do not miss the shredder. Kind of noisy on otherwise nice weekends.)