

Soil tests unveil the mysteries beneath

Soil defines the success of a garden, but for many it's a mystery.

Cracking the case doesn't have to be complicated, said James Cassidy, instructor of soil science at Oregon State University. The geeks of the gardening world can delve deep into the makeup of soil, but if that's not your thing, Cassidy has one piece of advice: add organic matter. Whether you've got soil composed mostly of clay, sand or something in between, it can be improved by the addition of compost.

"If your soil is sandy and drains too quick, add organic matter. If it has a lot of clay and drains too slowly, add organic matter," he said. "Eventually, it will solve the problem."

Most importantly, Cassidy added, compost feeds the billions of essential micro-organisms that live in the soil and make nutrients available to plants in a complex system known as the soil food web. In the process, they improve the structure of the soil, opening up pathways for air and water.

"Those billions of organisms need to eat the same as we do," he noted. "If you feed all the microbes and creepy crawlies, you can see the soil change."

You'll notice the transfor-



KYM POKORNY
Your Garden



Photo by Chris LaBelle

A beautiful, productive garden depends on healthy soil, and a test can help you get it that way.

mation by the healthy look, feel and smell of your soil and by the way plants respond. For a more precise way to keep track, tests taken every couple of years will give you a record so you can see specifically over time how organic material changes the soil. The test results also provide information about how to fertilize to make nutrients available to plants in the short term.

"You take a sample, send it to the lab, pay around \$25 and get an assessment of your soil," he said. "It's the best money you'll ever spend."

Soil tests reveal the nutrients and micro-nutrients present in your soil. A standard analysis measures organic matter, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, magnesium, sodium and pH. Most often nitrogen is not included in the test because typically it leaches out of the soil during winter rains. After testing your soil sample, the lab sends you the results along with lime and fertilizer recommendations. Knowing the nutrient levels of your soil helps you avoid

over- or under-fertilizing, saving you money and keeping excess fertilizer out of waterways, Cassidy said.

If you have questions about your analysis or need help interpreting the results, consult an OSU Extension master gardener or the publication "Fertilizing Your Garden: Vegetables, Fruits, and Ornamentals."

To collect a soil sample, choose an area of the garden where you grow similar plants, Cassidy said. For example, collect samples in a vegetable garden, lawn or ornamental shade or sun bed. In each area, dig five or

six small spadeful of soil. Take these sub-samples in a nonsymmetrical "W" pattern rather than a straight row. Push aside any leaves or mulch and dig down 6 to 8 inches. Place all the sub-samples in a clean container and mix together. Be sure to use clean tools. Refer to "A Guide to Collecting Soil Samples for Farms and Gardens" for more information.

When you're ready to send the soil in, check with the lab for instructions on how to package and mail your sample. OSU Extension provides a list of laboratories serving Oregon.

MI TOWN

We'll bid a fond farewell to the wintry month of January in just a few more days. It will be good to welcome February, which will bring us more daylight, better weather and St. Valentine celebrations. Groundhog Day is right around the corner and we'll see what the weather prognosticators have to say about the possibilities of six more weeks of winter.

In the Willamette Valley, we know that we'll have more of the usual rain, along with occasional frosty mornings for the next six weeks, and then some. Even though we're beginning to see the first hints of spring-time with tiny buds on the trees and the slightest bit of what will become daffodils peeking out from the wet



PATTY TAYLOR DUTCHER
Columnist

and occasionally frozen ground, it's still a long time before we can relegate those heavy coats and wool hats to the back of the closet.

For those of us who don't have reservations on the next flight to a warm weather paradise or a cruise in the Greek Isles, MI Town has some good alternatives — and you don't have to have a passport or melt down the credit card to enjoy local and community events. Our university and high school teams are in the midst of another busy sports season,

and community support is always appreciated. Whether your choice is basketball, wrestling or volleyball, it's fun to get together with friends and neighbors and forget about these dark winter days.

Sometimes it's fun to dress up and have a special celebration to chase away the raindrops. The Pentacle Theatre and Salem Symphony are excellent places to go for evening or matinee performances.

The Monmouth Senior Center has something good happening every weekday. Whether you are new to MI Town or have lived here for many years, it's a great place to meet others and discover so many good things about our community. There are

field trips for occasional get-aways, the monthly Community Breakfast (Feb. 6), classes (from art to yoga — and just about everything in between), monthly potlucks and birthday celebrations, as well as the soup and pie luncheons and the Victorian Tea. The monthly newsletter can be accessed via the city of Monmouth's website (www.ci.monmouth.or.us). For more information, please call Sue Teal at 503-838-5678 or stop by the center, at 180 Warren St. Business hours are from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m., weekdays.

Let's all be hopeful that better weather days are ahead — and that if the groundhog does indeed see his shadow, we'll have lots of things to keep us busy and happy in MI-Town.

COMMUNITY CALENDAR

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WEDNESDAY, FEB. 3 (cont.)

• **American Red Cross blood drive** — 10:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., Werner University Center, 345 N. Monmouth Ave., Monmouth. Redcrossblood.org.

• **Helping Hands Emergency Food Bank** — 10 a.m. to noon, Monmouth Christian Church, 959 Church St. W., Monmouth. For eligible community members; available every Wednesday. 541-404-6517.

• **Scrabble with Betty** — 1 p.m., Independence Public Library, 175 Monmouth St., Independence. Scrabble games first Wednesday of every month. Free; refreshments and prizes available. 503-551-7687 or 503-838-1811.

• **Willamette Valley Food Assistance Program Food Bank** — 1:30 to 6:30 p.m., 888 Monmouth Cutoff Road, Building E, Dallas. Weekly distribution for eligible community members. 503-831-5634.

• **Yarning for Others** — 3 to 5 p.m., St. Thomas Episcopal Church, 1486 SW Levens St., Dallas. Knitters and crocheters gather to make clothing and accessories for those in need on the first Wednesday of every month. 503-689-7222.

• **Brew and B5: The Old Testament** — 7 p.m., St. Thomas Episcopal Church, 1486 SW Levens St., Dallas. A lecture series on the Old Testament. Bring brew of choice — coffee, tea, chai, beer, wine, cider. 435-503-4304.

Look What's Coming Up!

Plan on picking up your Itemizer-Observer in February —good stuff and no fluff!

February 3rd

The Big Game!

We'll be publishing all the local spots to catch the game on February 7th!



February 3 & 10

Sweetheart of a Deal

Our full color Valentine's Day page to make shopping for your loved one easy!



February 17th

Money Talks!

Want to get the most for your money? Then you'll want to read this section!



February 24th

Babies of 2015

The cutest babies ever born live here in Polk County! We'll show you!



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