

Gardening in the Foothills

Springtime in the foothills- the hills are green, wild flowers are blooming, trees are leafing out and your yard is ready to be transformed into the picture perfect idea you dreamed of all winter. Everyone enjoys working in the yard at this time of year the temperature is just perfect. You have been waiting all winter to get out and dig in that wonderful foothill soil. Armed with your shovel you are ready to get things growing. As you anticipate digging your first hole, the reality sets in. This is El Dorado County and the good soil washed downhill. You do not have beautiful soil like the valley, our soil is clay and rock and more rocks. Digging this ground is not a picnic. You have been waiting all winter, cooped up living with the rain, snow, freezing temperatures, and frozen soil. Sacramento is looking better by the minute, after all the soil is great there. So what if they have smog, fog, and traffic to go with that great soil. You can have great soil without the smog, fog, and traffic.

The key to getting good soil is to amend. Top dressing annually will help to keep the soil loose and nutritional. It can be as easy as composting your yard trimmings, using fall leaves (we have much better fall color than Sacramento does), or purchasing a soil conditioner and working it into the soil. Yes, it is hard work but it is necessary for your plants to grow and thrive in our soil conditions. You do not have to amend the whole yard, just the area that you want to plant in. Common sense tells us, if you take a plant grown in beautiful nursery soil, dig a tiny hole and plop it in the ground without amending the native soil it is going to struggle and chances are it will not do well. Creating a transition zone of native soil and amended soil actually helps your plant live and thrive in our soil. Late winter and early spring is the best time to amend your planting areas. The soil is soft from the winter rains, but not too mucky. The clods of dirt break up more readily when moist, which makes them a little easier to distinguish from a rock. Creating a blend of 2/3 native soil mixed with 1/3 organic matter is just what your new plants need to thrive. You can make your own compost or use a bag of composted fir mulch, planting mix, or a soil conditioner. Never use potting soil to amend. Potting soil is primarily peat moss and perlite and, as the name states, for use in pots. Sand when used alone as an amendment tends to bind with the clay and make bricks.

Digging the hole... STOP. You do not need to dig halfway to China for a plant, unless of course you live there. A huge misconception is that you need a deep hole. In fact, what you end up with is a huge sump in which water can collect and drown a plant. Another problem with a deep hole is the plant will settle too deep. Plants that are planted too deeply will have problems later on. You need a hole that is twice as wide as the container and the depth of the root ball or soil mass. Do not dig deep! In the nursery industry we call it "planting proud". Your plant should sit ½ inch above finished grade when you are done. Believe me it is easier to add soil or mulch later than to try to raise a plant that has sunk into the ground.

In addition to amending your soil with organic matter, we recommend that you feed your new plant with a starter fertilizer to get good root development. If you want to keep everything lush and beautiful, feed your plants. They are working hard to get established and need a good balanced diet of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K). Three corresponding numbers on every fertilizer represent these three elements. Plants grown in a nursery are loved and watered and fed consistently. You need to do this too. We recommend you feed your plants three times a year with a balanced granular

fertilizer, first of March, Memorial Day and Labor Day. Twice a year with an extended release fertilizer, March and September. Water-soluble fertilizers are great for container plants, where constant watering leaches the fertilizer out quicker and more frequent feeding is necessary.

Now you have great soil and a basic feeding schedule. All you need are happy healthy plants and a lounge chair to sit back, and enjoy your beautiful yard. You deserve it!

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