

Flora & Fauna

The Real Dirt on ... Dirt!

Pity the poor life of soil – it's so taken for granted. Some people have little respect for dirt that they think of it only as a foundation for plants; the stuff that keeps them upright so we can grow the flowers and vegetables we crave. But you might be surprised to learn that dirt deserves our attention, understanding and respect, and this article offers a look at how vitally important dirt will always be to us gardeners.

Imagine a teaspoon full of soil. Would it surprise you to learn that in just that small spoon of dirt reside dormant weed seeds, hundreds of microscopic worms and thousands of fungal spores? That's not all: millions of miniature insects and at least five billion bacteria are also crammed into this small amount of ordinary garden dirt. Now, that's one crowded teaspoon and enough evidence to confirm the fact that soil is a living organism capable of doing many amazing things for the seeds and plants we put into the earth.

Despite the fact that you can't see a thing (no matter how long you stare at that spoonful of dirt) all of these organisms we just listed are working like crazy to make soil hospitable for the plants they've been put in charge of nurturing. Together, they produce the glue that binds soils while also creating tiny tunnels running through even its thickest clots. These tunnels offer pathways so oxygen and water can penetrate deeply into the soil, helping convert nutrients into substances that plant roots can absorb efficiently for maximum growth.

We don't know about you, but we're impressed by the efficiency of this natural system and have developed a new appreciation for soil – particularly since learning that improving soil can improve plants, too. Let's say you spend lots of time picking the perfect plants, fertilizers and pesticides, but no time considering how to make soil more hospitable for the plants you grow. It's time to change that way of thinking and figure out how to start from the ground up so our gardens become not just good but great.

The first step is identifying the organic makeup of your particular dirt. Is it sandy, rocky or clay? Once you know which, you can routinely add organic matter to beef up its nutrients. What kind of organic matter works? Just about anything that rots and doesn't cost a cent! Grass clippings, hay or straw, leaves, barnyard manure and kitchen scraps all boost the power of soil and make it richer and more hospitable to your plants. You've probably heard these kinds of leavings referred to as compost and there's no denying that your garbage will improve the structure, texture and drainage of your soil, but did you know compost also acts to reduce pests and diseases because it boosts a plant system's immune system? According to experts, no amount of store-bought compost or fertilizer comes close to equaling the power of our organic garbage.

While compost doesn't take the place of fertilizer, it does reduce the amount of fertilizer a gardener needs to put down each year by about 50%. Another good point about compost is that while it does a great job of boosting your garden's appearance, size and health with only a yearly application, you don't run the risk of harming your plants if you apply it more often.

We could say more about the blessings of soil, but this introduction is meant to whet your appetite and help you realize how much of a treasure dirt can be. The name may have some negative connotations, but the real stuff sure doesn't. It's where life begins in your garden!

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Household Tips:

Oh, There's No Room For Smells at the Holiday

'Fess up: Do you light a scented candle or get out the deodorizing spray to vanquish smells when holiday company's on the way? Given the miracles science has come up with, these remedies are, of course, excellent, but if there's no candle on hand and your spray is gone, it's time to call in the odor police. Who's on the squad? Captain Cinnamon, Officer Coffee, Captain Vinegar, Captain Ammonia, Officer Fruits and Officer Baking Soda. Each of these can help banish a smell before it sabotages your family's celebration.

- Tip #1: Sprinkle cinnamon on aluminum foil, place in a hot oven and leave the door open. Yum!
- Tip #2: Put a teaspoon of coffee into a container and heat it up in your oven for a welcome smell.
- Tip #3: Feed your garbage disposal lemon, orange or grapefruit rinds for instant sweetening.
- Tip #4: Boil a small amount of ammonia on your stovetop to neutralize strong kitchen odors.
- Tip #5: Rid your hands of fishy smells; wash 'em in baking soda.
- Tip #6: Leave a bowl of sliced apples in a room that needs help. Stale air will be replaced by apple scents in a few days.

December

- 1763 America's first Jewish synagogue was established in Newport, Rhode Island
- 1878 The first telephone was installed in the White House
- 1901 The Gillette Company announced a new shaving concept: the disposable razor
- 1932 A new show called "The Adventures of Charlie Chan" debuted on the NBC Blue Network
- 1942 On the campus of the University of Chicago, scientists set off the first ever controlled nuclear chain reaction
- 1952 The first televised human birth took place in Denver, Colorado
- 1982 Medical pioneer, Dr. Robert Jarvik, implanted the first artificial heart into the chest of dentist Barney Clark at the University of Utah
- 1990 Due to the Persian Gulf crisis, gasoline prices escalated to an unprecedented \$1.90 a gallon

3 Remedies to Help Your Family Have Happy Holidays

Whether it's a bunch of contagious kids at the day care center, your neighbor's cough or the sneezing department store clerk handing over your Christmas packages, there's always the chance that holiday colds and flu – “the gifts that keeps on giving” – will invade your world this month. While there's never a good time to get sick, Christmas and New Year's are perhaps the worst of all because there are so many social engagements on our calendars and our usual routine accelerates to warp speed. Shopping, baking, visiting and wrapping are stressful enough. Add a fever, fatigue or an earache, and what should be the happiest time of the year turns into the most miserable. We want to help! Here are some terrific ultra-natural winter health tips you can try out on ailing family members, then keep in your healing library year-round if they work for you.

Irascible Earaches: They're such small organs – how is it that earaches are so awfully painful? Probably because eardrums and ear tissue are so delicate and fragile. When bad bugs assault them, they just can't stand up to the attack. A Washington state-based doctor swears by a mix of oils that can be purchased at health food stores to get rid of ear pressure and infections fast. He recommends mullein (formal name: *Verbascum densiflorum*) and garlic-infused oils to banish the bugs fast. Before bed, mix and warm the drops, but don't risk overheating them! Use grandma's secret: warm the bottle under your arm for a minute. Tilt the head of the sufferer to the side and squeeze five drops into the ear. Trap the oil with a cotton ball to keep the mix from running out. According to the doc, you should experience immediate relief.

Exhausted Eyes: Perhaps the most precious of all five senses, we seem to abuse our eyes as if we had an extra pair lying around should they ever need replacement. We burn the candle at both ends and skimp on sleep, subject our peepers to eyestrain as we address holiday cards by a dim light and rub them continually without regard for how dirty our hands may be. No wonder our eyes get rebellious and complain! Soothing chamomile could be your best friend when your eyes grow weary but your task list is still long. Surprisingly, the flower that works so well on tummies is also a revitalizer for the eyes. Simply soak a compress in chamomile tea, lie down, then allow the chamomile to soak through your eyelids. Chances are, you'll feel immediate soothing as chamomile reduces the swelling in the capillaries located in the eye. If you're in need of a specific recipe for this terrific eye relaxer, try this: Immerse a teabag or one teaspoon of chamomile flowers into one cup of boiling water and let it steep for 20 minutes. Strain the tea, cool it down, soak a washcloth in the bath, and you're good to go. 15 or 20 minutes of chamomile tea therapy should do the job (of course, the lying down part won't hurt either).

(Saturday Night) Fever: There's something about watching the mercury or digital numbers rise on a thermometer that adds an extreme element of fear to any illness. High fevers in kids are alarming - although not as dangerous as they are in adults – so having a fever should signal quick action. However, there's a school of thought that believes that maintaining a low-grade fever is a good thing because not breaking it immediately does a better job of permanently vanquishing the bug that started things. Mild fevers (up to 100 degrees), according to this theory, are best treated with a blanket, yarrow tea and a good sweat. For higher temperatures, try just the tea (brewed with 2 yarrow teabags to one cup of boiling water steeped for 15 minutes) – no blanket. This remedy is for adults only. Follow your pediatrician's advice for children, and, as always, if your temperature escalates beyond 103, seek medical help.

Vanquishing the TV Monster

Will there be a new TV under the tree this year? Don't turn it on until you read this article!

Those of us who have raised children to adulthood know how easy it is to get this habit started: You prop the baby or toddler up in a safe chair, turn on the TV and turn your attention to sorting the laundry, cutting up veggies or changing the linens. It takes next to no time to grab baby's attention and before you know it, you've got a nice chunk of time to accomplish tasks on that endless “to-do” list.

Truth is, none of us mean to use the TV as a babysitter, but as someone who allowed it to happen, I can tell you that the habituation is so innocent, most of us don't even know it's happening. What started out as one kid's show in the morning morphed into “Gee, I need to call the doctor, I'll just put on the TV for a couple of minutes so I can talk.” How easy that is – and how habit-forming. Without realizing it, I was turning my kids into TV junkies, a thankless battle that I have since watched my kids struggle with as they raise their own kids.

It's hard not to marvel at the influence television has had on our lives. We get the latest world news, fabulous entertainment and sports. But TV has also given our society overweight kids with short attention spans. Too much TV has been tied to sleep problems. Importantly, research studies in Washington, California and New Zealand have proven a correlation between television and learning; the more time spent in front of the screen, the poorer a child's performance in school.

Fact is, televisions (especially now that many homes are moving to huge, wall-sized HD-equipped screens with realistic sound) aren't going anywhere. They have become part of our lives, as evidenced by the preponderance of families who have made TV sets part of nearly every room in the house. That said, how do we keep the entertainment part of television without getting kids hooked? Prevention magazine has tackled that issue and given us some super tips!

- 1) Establish rules. No TV 'til homework is done. No television during meals. Some experts believe that giving older kids a weekly “TV allowance” provides the kind of guidelines kids need. Of particular importance is setting these rules in stone, sticking by them and making sure babysitters and other caregivers stick to them, too.
- 2) Use TV time wisely by balancing entertainment with education. If you believe that an Animal Planet program or an A&E biography would be of value to your child, take advantage of it.
- 3) Watch TV with your kids to get an accurate view of what they're seeing. It's the best way to put certain shows on your black list, plus some shows can be great conversation starters. Don't miss these opportunities to open the dialog door between you and your children.
- 4) See TV for what it really is: Your child is exposed to around 40,000 commercials annually, most for high-calorie foods. Seeing what affects your child can help thwart supermarket aisle meltdowns. You'll understand exactly what drives your child's desire for “stuff.”
- 5) House your TV in a cabinet so it's clear when viewing is off limits. When the cabinet door is closed, kids need to learn to respect that.
- 6) Be aware of the number of times you're tempted to use TV as a babysitter. Have other activities ready as substitutes (coloring books they've never seen, a blanket tent, etc.).
- 7) The AAP has conducted studies on toddler brains on the effects of TV watching and concluded that early exposure may harm brain development and reading skills. They recommend no TV watching for children under two. It goes without saying that TV in a child's room isn't a good idea. It encourages unsupervised viewing and adds to the hours a child watches each week
- 8) As a family, check out the Sunday newspaper's TV section and use a highlighter to pick certain shows for that week. By planning what you'll watch each day, you'll also set viewing guidelines and give yourself an out when kids demand time in front of the tube that hasn't already been agreed to by everyone at the Sunday family meeting!

Ingredients:

- 1 box devil's food cake mix
- 2 tablespoons cocoa powder
- 1/2 cup grated bittersweet chocolate
- 1/4 cup cognac
- 3 eggs
- 1/3 cup vegetable oil
- 1 cup chopped walnuts for cake
- 3/4 cup chopped walnuts for decoration
- 1 cup milk
- 1 package dark chocolate frosting

- 1) Oil and flour two 9" layer cake pans (use oiled wax paper circles for better results!).
- 2) Combine all ingredients in a mixing bowl for about 30 seconds.
- 3) Scrape down the bowl and beaters, then blend for another 2 minutes.
- 4) Pour into prepared pans.
- 5) Bake at 350°F for 20 to 22 minutes or until cake layers spring back to the touch.
- 6) Let layers rest for 5 minutes before turning them out on a cake rack.
- 7) When layers are cool, frost first, top with second and frost outside of the cake.
- 8) Use 3/4 cup of chopped walnuts to cover the area around the sides of the cake only.

You volunteered to bring cake to the neighborhood New Year's Eve party. An ordinary cake won't do, but who's got enough energy to bake one from scratch? Not you! If your New Year's resolution is to impress without breaking a sweat, this easy cake is your little secret. It's rich. It's delicious. And it starts out as a box of cake mix and a box of icing. Now, that's the way to start 2008!



Make a Dramatic (Cheap) Holiday Centerpiece

You walk into the store and the first thing you lay your eyes on is a dramatic centerpiece guaranteed to turn heads on any holiday dinner table. For a moment, you disappear into dreamland, imagining "oohs" and "aahs" from family members followed by embarrassing flattery from friends and guests. You approach the centerpiece and peek at the price tag. That's when your idyllic reverie comes to an abrupt end and you start thinking about the good-old reindeer centerpiece you've just unpacked with your tree trim.

Now, suppose you could craft a new centerpiece that will earn kudos but cost very little. Believe it. You can make a dramatic pyramid of holiday gift boxes in colors of your choosing and you can even tailor it to fit your table or a shelf! Here's the material you'll need to make this attention-getting centerpiece:

- Fresh or silk pine boughs
- A big platter (this will determine the size of your centerpiece)
- Empty boxes
- Gift wrap
- Ribbons and trim
- Glue gun and glue
- Masking tape

Begin by gift-wrapping each of the empty gift boxes you've gathered, but don't put ribbon on the largest one; this will be your base/anchor. Secure it to the center of your tray with masking tape. Arrange bigger wrapped boxes around the periphery of the center box and when you've got this layer exactly the way you want it, use your glue gun to attach contact points of each box. Next, start layer two. Like a wedding cake, artfully arrange the second layer using smaller boxes. Use hot glue to anchor this layer. If you've started with a small platter, you may only need a single box for the top of the pile, so make it your prettiest. Otherwise, go for a third layer. When all of the boxes are in place, tuck pieces of pine boughs into crevices to tie the centerpiece together and hide any gaps.

Tips and extras: If you're unsure about how your gift pyramid centerpiece will look when it's done, stack all of the boxes in place but don't glue them together until you're comfortable with the arrangement. Then, reconstruct it using your glue gun. If you'd like to turn the centerpiece into a surprise for guests, fill boxes with little gifts and stack the pile (again, don't glue boxes together). Arrange ribbon leads so each person's gift extends into their table setting.

Carpet Talk: Dare to CARE

How many organizations do you or your family members belong to? Kiwanis? Lions? A local woman's club? Maybe you're a member of a gardening club or a church committee. Devoting time to the causes and movements we care about can be rewarding but difficult, given our hectic schedules, but since our world is much improved by grassroots efforts undertaken by people just like you, volunteering is critical to our way of life.

Happily, many industries have their own organizations and we've found one that directly impacts your world: CARE. The Carpet America Recovery Effort is made up of a huge group of people who probably had something to do with manufacturing and selling you or your home's developer your carpeting and floors. This group is the epitome of cooperation, linking the U.S. government to the flooring industry with a single goal: increasing the amount of carpet being recycled and finding ways to make sure that rugs being removed from homes are morphed into new products so they don't find their way into landfills.

CARE's mission is a serious effort launched by members of the carpet industry to make sure its product is well manufactured, provides the most amount of use and happiness during its original life, yet doesn't add to the monumental growth of landfills in our nation. To help make the organization's mission a reality, CARE members contribute their time to act as advisors and researchers, searching for ways to give new life to carpet that's no longer suitable for our homes and businesses.

Next time you call your carpet care professional in for a shampoo or other service, remember that there's an entire industry out there working on solutions for giving old carpet a second life. This group publishes research reports and is even working on a ten-year study, due to be published in 2012, with all kinds of creative solutions for recovering post-consumer carpet. Think about it. Your carpet could come back as any number of wonderful things in its next life! We wish we could tell you exactly what the CARE folks plan to do with all the carpet they save from landfills, but as of this newsletter's publication, the association is keeping that information under wraps. We can't wait to see what they come up with. Stay tuned.

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GRAND RAPIDS, MI
PERMIT #1254

This issue of Neighborhood News brought to you by:

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Inside this issue you'll find:

- The Real Dirt on Dirt
- Household Tips: No Bad Holiday Odors
- Health Remedies for a Happy Holiday
- Vanquishing the TV Monster
- Chocolate Cognac Layer Cake
- Make a Dramatic Holiday Centerpiece
- Carpet Talk: Dare to CARE
- December Money-Saving Special

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