

Rise above clay

Quick Fix for Poor Soil

If you've been battling clay soil in your garden with only mixed results, it's time to throw in the trowel!

No more truckloads of coarse compost, sand and manure. Instead, learn to live in peaceful harmony with your clay soil — build beds *on top* of it. Here's a simple method that will get you growing above it all in no time.

MAKE YOUR MARK Once you've decided where you'd like your mounded bed, or berm, use a pliable garden hose to lay out its size and shape. At this point, it's easy to get a little carried away with the size, so give your back a break and remember that it's usually best to start out small — with just one or two beds — and then add more each year if you'd like. If you keep the berm no more than 4 to 6 feet wide, you won't have to step into the bed to work on it later. Otherwise, just plan to place a few steppers to make maintenance easier. When you're satisfied with the location, size, and shape of your bed, mark the border with flour or paint and remove the hose.

CUT THE GRASS Next, either rent or hire a sod cutter to cut the turf in your bed area and flip the pieces over. Let the roots dry out for a couple of days. Then stack the sod in layers in the center of the bed, where the berm will be highest. Keep the layers 8 to 12 inches in from the outside edges of the bed so the sod won't sprout.

With the base of your berm in place, it's time to move on to the soil. Actually, it's a mix of half top soil and half compost. Look at "Do the math" at right to figure how much of each material you'll need to buy.

PILE IT ON Now comes the fun part. Have the materials dumped on a driveway or unused area as near to the new bed as possible. You don't need to mix the materials — just spread a layer of soil, then a layer of compost and so on. Keep in mind that your berm may settle by half over time, and

you want to have enough soil in it to hold at least a 1-gallon plant's roots. So build the berm up at least 18 to 24 inches to allow room for this. Make sure you have at least 12 inches of soil covering the sod to discourage any sprouting. Edge or dig a trench around the bed, as shown in the illustration, to keep the edges neat.

Congratulations! You've built a canvas that can be painted with a much larger paintbox of plants. No more using just the normal clay-tolerant plants that you've always been limited to.

TOP IT OFF To help hold the soil in place and to continue to build up the soil, top with 2 to 3 inches of mulch like small pine bark pieces or fine-textured mulch that will incorporate quickly into the soil. Water the bed if it doesn't rain. Let it settle for at least a week or two before planting to prevent the plants from shifting. (Letting it settle over the winter would be ideal.) The illustration shows that

plants in up to a 1-gallon container fit easily without disturbing the sod, but you can plant larger ones if you wish. You should hold off planting trees for a few years until the settling is done.

Every spring, topdress your planting with a couple inches of compost or mulch as the old mulch breaks down, to keep improving the soil and feeding the plants. It'll take a good three years or so for your new bed to finish settling and the plants to get really established. By then, of course, you may have bermed your entire neighborhood! ♦

— Deborah Gruca

Do the math

Not sure how much soil and compost to buy? Use this formula:

$$\frac{\text{Length (in feet)} \times \text{Width (in feet)} \times \text{Height (in inches)}}{12} = \text{Cubic feet}$$

For bags, you need to know cubic feet. Need cubic yards? Divide by 27 cubic feet for bulk amendments.

