THE PLANTER'S PALETTE

Plants for garden artistry

BED PREPARATION

For many people, the urge to garden is inspired by the sight of a glorious perennial border at its blooming peak. This vision is the end product of planning and labor to create the best nurturing environment for these plants. Because perennials grow and produce flowers year after year, it's particularly important that beds in which they are planted are carefully prepared.

When is the best time to prepare a bed? At The Planter's Palette, we endorse a user-friendly approach: prepare your beds when you have the time, energy, and inclination to do so. Fall preparation paves the way for early planting come spring and allows the winter freezing and thawing to act on the soil making nutrients more available and improving soil structure. Spring preparation is also excellent for a successful gardening season, because the newly tilled soil is loose and easy for roots to spread into.

We recommend this four-step process to insure the growing success of new perennial beds.

STEP 1

Remove any sod covering the area you intend to plant. The fastest way to do this is by digging the sod out. If your new bed covers a large area, you may wish to rent a sod cutter. For smaller areas, sod can be removed by hand using a straight edged spade. Begin by using a sharp spade to cut around the bedline, defining the area for removal. Cut a second line about a foot into the bed area, parallel to the first line. Make perpendicular cuts between the two lines, for main manageable squares of sod. Using the spade, slice under the squares of sod and lift them out until the bed is stripped. There are two other methods that are slower but enable us to take advantage of dead grass as organic matter. The use of the herbicide glyphosphate will kill the sod in ten to fourteen days. The sod can also be smothered with the non-colored sections of newspaper with a layer of compost placed on top. Leave all of this in place until the sod is dead and then rototill all of it in at once.

STEP 2

Loosen the soil in the new bed. Use a spade, a spading fork, or a border fork to dig and turn the compacted soil breaking up clods as you go. Remove as many rocks, weeds and roots as you can. You may want to use a rototiller for large beds. While these machines are very efficient at pulverizing soil, remember that you will not be able to dig as great a depth with a rototiller.

New gardeners always ask about the depth to which a bed should be prepared, and we respond with the generalization that the more deeply the bed is dug the better the planting results. Roots grow much more readily

through loosened soil, allowing plants to grow faster. So when you are digging, remember that eighteen inches is excellent, a foot is good and six inches should be seen as the minimum.

If you are digging by hand, stand on the soil that hasn't been turned over. Take slices off the edge nearest to yourself and place it two to three feet in front of where you are standing. The goal is to loosen the soil to a greater depth and to mix in amendments at the same time. It is done in small blocks. Keep the trench where you are digging open so that you can dig deeper. When you dig to the far end of the garden fill the trench with the soil from the beginning.

STEP 3

Add organic matter and amendments to the new bed. The heavy clay soils of northern Illinois makes the addition of organic matter the most important step. Organic matter provides nutrients, helps the tiny clay particles stick together in aggregates which creates a nice crumbly soil, and it is food for the many soil microbes and earthworms. Earthworms are a sign of a heathy soil. Our first choice for an organic matter is mushroom compost; a mixture of well composted straw, horse manure, peat and other materials. While it has no measurable effect on soil pH, mushroom compost does a marvelous job of improving soil texture and providing nutrients. Other organic additives that you may want to use include sphagnum peat moss, organic peat, shredded pine mulch, composted cow manure, shredded leaves, or your own garden compost.

To be effective in loosening our heavy clay soils, large amounts of organic matter should be worked into the new bed. We recommend spreading four to six inches over the top of the bed for every twelve inches of soil depth you are preparing.

Other amendments to add at the time of initial bed preparation are fertilizers and sulfur. A balanced slow release mineral fertilizer can be added at the labeled rates or you can have a soil test done for specific information. Sulfur lowers the pH and in northern Illinois the addition of one to two pounds per 100 square feet of garden will bring our alkaline soil into a range that is very favorable to most plants.

STEP 4

Mulch the bed to protect plantings, keep down the weeds and retain moisture. We recommend that newly prepared beds be mulched to a depth of two inches. A mulched bed reduces the stress for transplants by keeping the soil cool and moist, and reduces labor by keeping weed growth to a minimum. Mulch can be spread before or after planting. Some people find it easier to pull back the mulch to set individual plants and others prefer to spread the mulch all around the newly planted garden. If you have prepared a bed in the fall and are not planting until spring, a layer of mulch will keep the soil loose so no tilling will be needed in the spring. To reduce the incidence of stem rot make sure the mulch around the plant's base or crown is not too deep.