

Clay soil meets its match

By RICK ROSEN
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Most area gardeners know that the heavy, sticky clay we call soil needs to be amended before you plant a new bed. Most also probably know the value of adding such amendments as compost.

CHORES

But one amendment you can add to new plant beds is less well-known, and it may be the most valuable of all.

Expanded shale, a gravel-size rock that is pumped full of air, aerates clay soil, makes it easy to work and helps it drain better, says Steven W. George, a Texas Cooperative Extension horticulturist in Dallas. Best of all, you add it to garden beds only one time.

"It is just so much better; it makes it fun to garden in clay," Mr. George says.

Plant roots don't get enough oxygen in clay soils. Raised beds, compost and other amendments help. Expanded shale is another solution.

"Test plants had larger, healthier root systems with expanded shale," Mr. George says.

How do you know if you need expanded shale? "In summer, if the soil gets big cracks when dry, you definitely need expanded shale," he says.

Here are the steps for applying expanded shale:

- Till in 3 inches of expanded shale, 6 to 8 inches deep.

- Till in 3 inches of compost. Make sure the compost is "finished" — no green material.

- Mix the expanded shale, compost and soil thoroughly.

- Cover with a 3-inch layer of mulch.

If you till expanded shale and compost into clay soil, then mulch, you should never need to add commercial fertilizer, Mr. George says. "As fully finished mulch breaks down, it acts as a slow-release fertilizer."

You won't need to add compost again, Mr. George says. The mulch will gradually break down and work its way into the soil. A year after preparing the bed, lay enough mulch on top to bring the mulch layer up to 3 inches. In subsequent years, the mulch breaks down faster, and you will add mulch in spring and fall to bring the mulch depth to 3 inches. Nothing else — neither compost nor



EVANS CAGLAGE/Staff Photographer

Expanded shale, a gravel-size rock, helps make clay soil easier to work and improves drainage. More good news: You only add it to the soil once.

commercial fertilizer — is necessary.

Expanded shale won't help in existing plant beds. It works only if you can till it in. (For existing beds, lay 2 inches of compost on top of your mulch and water the compost in; do this twice a year, every year.)

Another tip: Texas A&M says the 1/4-inch to 3/8-inch-size shale works best. (There also is a smaller size on the market.)

"In a heavy clay soil, if I were limited to only one material," says Mr. George, "I would take expanded shale and never look back."

Expanded shale costs more than compost, generally 10 to 12 percent more if you buy in bulk. However, because it eliminates the need to add compost annually, expanded shale is cheaper in the long run.

It is most economical to buy in bulk. Living Earth Technology, which has four area facilities, sells 1 cubic yard for \$48. Soil Building Systems sells it for \$45.

Many nurseries and garden centers sell 40-pound bags (about a cubic foot). We found them at North Haven Gardens in Dallas for \$8.99 and at Redenta's (Dallas and Arlington) for \$7.99; Calloway's sells the same size for \$9.99.

If you need to determine how much expanded shale to buy, North Haven Gardens has a good online calculator. See nhg.com/pdf/Gardenmeasurements.pdf.

WHERE TO FIND IT

BY THE BAG:

- North Haven Gardens, 7700 Northaven Road
- Calloway's, multiple locations
- Redenta's, 2001 Skillman St., Dallas; 5111 W. Arkansas Lane, Arlington

IN BULK:

- Soil Building Systems, www.soilbuildingsystems.com, 972-831-8181.
- Living Earth Technology, www.livingearth.net; locations in Dallas, Lancaster, Plano and Rockwall.

When should I release wasps?

I bought trichogramma wasps and have them in the refrigerator. When should I put them out to control caterpillars in oak trees? Should I wait until I see caterpillars, or should the wasps be released in late February or March?
K.H., Fredericksburg

The best timing indicator is foliage on the trees where pest problems are expected. When the leaves start to emerge in the spring, make the first wasp release. Then do additional releases about every two weeks.

ORGANIC ANSWERS



HOWARD GARRETT
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Each time wasps are released, they will reproduce and natural pest control will increase.

The date for starting releases depends on the tree in question. Deciduous magnolias and some buckeyes are trying to break bud now, but pecans are weeks away from starting to grow.

I am having a hard time getting St. Augustine grass to grow in my yard. For five years, I have watered, fertilized, weeded and used pesticides for grubs and such. I have pampered this lawn, and I have the water and gardening bills to prove it. But the grass never seems to get thick and lush.

A neighbor down the street has beautiful St. Augustine grass. He uses brand-name chemicals with what looks to be great success. I have tried the same products, but I cannot get anything to work. I'm interested in learning to do things the natural way.

B.C., Corinth

I'll bet your neighbor is sneaking in organic amendments. If not, he eventually will have trouble caused by high-salt synthetic fertilizers.

You should apply dry molasses now at a rate of 20 pounds per 1,000 square feet and then begin following my Basic Organic Program. (See Resources.)

I need to apply something to a newly sodded lawn to level the area and add nutrients. Have you heard about a product sold in bulk by the Reclamation Station?

J.S., McKinney



FILE 2005/Staff

Trichogramma wasps are shipped as pupae in host eggs, glued to paper squares. They arrive ready to hatch out as adult wasps.

PASS IT ON

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OFFERINGS

World Book Encyclopedia. Complete set, 1964 edition. Good condition. Joanne, Highland Village, 972-317-4627.

Coarse-shredded mulch from tree limbs and leaves. Tree service has large amount. You haul. Pat, Dallas, 214-528-2266.

Sigrud Mureen

Shopping the Town



Birthday celebration

Have you heard that The Store in Lake Highlands is 5 years old? Celebrate with us on Friday, Feb. 23 and Saturday, Feb. 24. We'll have cake, punch, party favors and of course, a sale. **The Store in Lake Highlands**, 10233 E. Northwest Hwy at Ferndale, Suite 410. 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Mon. - Sat. 214-553-8850.

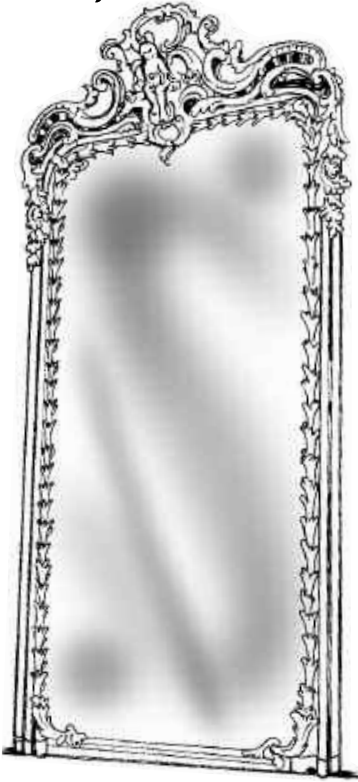
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SICK-BED ETIQUETTE: Here's what to do when visiting a friend in need.

WEDNESDAY TASTE

NOT SO EASY: The wine panel discovers "wine and cheese" can be a challenge

FRIDAY HOME

WE MEAN BIG: Heroic vases of clear glass are the top floral trend — not the flowers in them. In fact, if you're really hip, you won't use flowers at all, but leaves. Just leaves.

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