

CHORES



## Now's the time to improve soil

By RICK ROSEN  
Staff Writer

Gardeners know the value of adding organic material such as compost to their beds: It loosens our clay soils while adding nutrients.

But how do you get compost into the soil of a bed that is already filled with established plants?

Luckily, it's easy, and winter is an ideal time to apply it.

Sharon Lee Smith and Mary Wilhite, owners of organic nursery Blue Moon Gardens in Chandler, Texas, near Tyler, suggest these steps:

Pull up any weeds in the bed.

Apply a 2-inch layer of compost and expanded shale (a rock that can help loosen up clay soil) around plants.

Top with mulch, if you prefer. But some gardeners are content with the look of compost.

The compost and expanded shale will work their way into the soil to enrich it.

In addition, according to Texas Cooperative Extension, the compost acts as a slow-release fertilizer, adding nutrients throughout the growing season. Blue Moon also fertilizes with manure in April, June and September.

To prepare a new bed, till or dig compost into the top 6 to 8 inches of soil. (If the soil is not too compacted, you can forgo tilling.) Lay on the compost, followed by a layer of greensand or lava sand, then manure. Mulch with 2 inches of shredded hardwood or pine needles.

Ms. Smith follows a formula for determining how much compost is needed for a new bed. Multiply the length of the bed by the width and divide by four. Divide that figure by two. The total equals the number of 2-cubic-foot compost bags you should distribute.

Compost makes a great mulch, too, though some gardeners find that weeds easily sprout in it.

You also can use compost as a top

dressing on established lawns, according to the extension service. Aerating the soil before you lay down the compost helps it get to the roots.

While Blue Moon uses lava sand, which organic gardeners say makes nutrients more available to roots, or greensand (a source of iron and trace minerals), there are other products to mix with compost to improve the soil.

Karen Lozano, manager of Redenta's Garden on Skillman Street in Dallas, explains the amendments, in addition to greensand, in its Bed Prep product:

**Earthworm castings:** a fertilizer that provides a light amount of nitrogen and offers some help to establish roots.

**Cornmeal:** a natural fungicide.

**Dried molasses:** a biostimulant that helps break down large organic matter such as leaves and is a food source for beneficial microbes.

E-mail rrosen@dallasnews.com

## Pup won't like peppery spray

I can no longer find the animal repellent spray called N.I.M.B.Y. Is there another product or recipe that is equivalent? I'm trying to stop a puppy from loosening straps that hold a boat to a trailer. Bitter apple doesn't work.

J.N., Brownwood

Spraying a peppery liquid should help. Try Tabasco sauce and water. If that doesn't work, move up to habanero pepper juice. Be careful handling that because the peppers are extremely hot.

Look for commercial products that contain hot pepper and castor oil.

Is there something I can put inside the walls of a new house as it is being built to help repel insects?

C.G., Allen

Two organic treatments are effective. Boric acid or natural diatomaceous earth can be dusted into wall cavities before they are closed.

Spraying a borate product such as Bora-Care on all the bare wood before closing the walls is even more effective. Bora-Care is an insecticide, termiticide and fungicide. Find local distributors at [www.nisuscorp.com](http://www.nisuscorp.com).

On the west side of my house, the St. Augustine grass has died because neighbor boys play football there and tear up the turf. I have exposed dirt where grass used to be.

Can I replant this area with St. Augustine sod, or should I spread mulch to cover the exposed area until warmer weather? I have replaced the grass in this area before.

This area also provides drainage for my house and the one next door. I have timbers

ORGANIC ANSWERS



HOWARD GARRETT

along the borders of the area to keep the soil from washing away.

D.D., Fort Worth

Solid sod can be planted now or in the spring, but the grass problem won't be solved if the damage continues, especially if there is a drainage problem.

It may be time to consider a ground cover and plants that discourage playing such as agarita or dwarf Chinese holly. A muddy area is not a good place for football anyway.

I moved from Alvarado to Brownwood, and I have so many rocks under the soil in the yard that I have to garden in pots. I also have rattlesnakes on a hill behind my house.

J.T., Brownwood

Lots of plants will grow around the rocks if you give them a chance. Raising the soil's moisture level with organic amendments should discourage the rattlers.

RESOURCES

**ONLINE:** [www.dirtdoctor.com](http://www.dirtdoctor.com) for free organic-program handouts

**RADIO:** KSKY-AM (660), Sunday 8-11 a.m. [www.ksky.com](http://www.ksky.com).

**MAIL:** P.O. Box 140650, Dallas, TX 75214

# Please make the comics and puzzles bigger.

Nancy Upson  
Dallas, TX

## Is this big enough, Nancy?

You asked, we answered. Yes, we're making a few changes in *The Dallas Morning News*. All based on your input and your requests. Starting today, the comics and puzzles will be bigger (Monday through Saturday). More colorful (literally). And easier to find. Because they're in a new section all to themselves — called (oddly enough) Comics & Puzzles.

We're also adding more recipes to Taste. More fitness to Healthy Living. And, well, you're just going to have to see for yourself. It's just another way we're trying to help you Live Better Here.

The Dallas Morning News  
DallasNews.com

Live Better Here.

