

good soil guide

How to make your soil healthy and productive,
by Penny Hemming, Riverford's gardening expert.



Avoid walking on the soil and in so doing, compacting it. Use planks of wood to walk on, as they help to spread your weight.

Spread organic farm yard manure. This is particularly important if you want to grow fruit and vegetables successfully. You should add it before planting of crops. The rain leaches the nutrients down through the soil so you should be doing it on a yearly basis at least. Organic chicken pellets are a good alternative.

Rotate your crops. Don't grow the same veg in the same patch year after year. Plan ahead. Brassicas and onions should never be planted in the same position. Leave a three year gap before replanting the same crop.

Use mulches to cover areas in between plants to help retain moisture and also to suppress weed growth.



Make leaf mould in the autumn. This takes longer to break down than compost but is also a fantastic soil conditioner.



Put the 'no dig' method into action if possible.

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Avoid cultivating in wet conditions and if you have to cultivate, make it as shallow as possible.

Cover areas you're not using in the winter with black plastic, old carpets or cardboard to suppress weeds and hinder leaching of nutrients caused by too much rain.

The use of rotivators, ploughs and digging for cultivation (although necessary for commercial growers) is not good for the soil. If your soil is poor or compacted, however, you may need to work on improving the ground before you can avoid using these methods.



Make your own compost with kitchen and garden waste, and spread on beds when well-rotted. This will improve the make up of your soil, making it both more moisture retentive and free draining.



Use 'green manure' crops such as clover in your rotation plan to restore the fertility and improve the structure of the soil.

Avoid the soil becoming too acid. Worms don't like acid soil. Most garden soils have a ph between 5.5 and 8.0. The ideal ph for growing vegetables needs to be 6 - 7.5. Anything below this, add lime. Anything above, add sulphur.

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