

Lamorinda OUR HOMES

Lamorinda Weekly Volume 06 Issue 18 Wednesday, November 7, 2012



Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

How Does Your Garden Grow?

By Cynthia Brian

"As I farm the soil which yields my food, I share creation. Kings can do no more." Chinese proverb



Breakfast on the sunflower balcony

Photos Andy Scheck

"Dirt - \$5.00!" the sign read in a corner shop in New York City. At age 19, this was my first trip to the mega metropolis paved in concrete and blacktop. Hard times had hit our farm in California because

of the drought combined with the low prices wineries were paying grape growers. I ran to the nearest pay phone to call home. "Daddy," I shouted in the receiver, "I found the solution to save our ranch. DIRT! Here in New York City, five-pound bags of

dirt sell for \$5. We have 368 acres of the brown stuff. I think we hit pay dirt!" My daddy chuckled. "There's dirt and then there's soil," he responded.

Potting soil, topsoil, peat, compost, mulch – all are different compositions of soil mixes that can be purchased in garden centers to increase the texture, aeration, and nutrient concentration of your own backyard dirt. The best soil is a loamy soil because it contains a balance of sand, silt, clay, and humus. Without good soil, you'll never have a great garden, no matter where you buy your plants or how much you spend. I like to compare soil to building a house. You can design the most beautiful structure, but if you have not built a strong, solid foundation, the building will not endure. Even with excellent construction, a house still needs regular upkeep including painting, cleaning, re-roofing, gutter cleaning, water-proofing, termite inspections, and more to preserve its integrity. Our precious dirt requires the identical maintenance.

After years of growing, the soil in our once lush gardens is depleted of nutrients. Crop rotating, mulching, composting, amendments, and soil replacement are necessary. Fall is a great time of year to determine what kind of soil you have. Fill a small jar with soil samples and leave it to settle overnight. The next day you will see distinct layers with sand staying on the bottom, silt in the middle, and clay will be on top. Once you see what percentage you have of which type (and in our area, most likely you'll have mostly clay), you'll be able to purchase the correct "dirt" to fix your garden.

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