

Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

How Does Your Garden Grow?

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The optimum is a consistency that when rolled in the palm of your hand will be a bit gritty, smooth, sticky, dry, soft, crumbly, and dark like chocolate cake. As soon as you start increasing the health of your soil, you will start seeing results.

Since I focused on soil amendments and cover crops in my last issue, you may wonder why I am again preaching the benefits of nutrient rich dirt. Many readers contacted me after that article was published to complain about the lack of a bountiful vegetable harvest. The number one question was, "Should I replace my soil?"

One gardener with a bushel of practical knowledge when it comes to maintaining great soil to reap great crops is the publisher of Lamorinda Weekly, Andy Scheck. His tomatoes and zucchinis are so plentiful that he cans 20 pounds in an evening, drinking the sweet juice as he goes. I finally caught up with this busy man between videotaping the politicians, printing the latest newspaper, and, of course, puttering in his garden.

Interview with Andy Scheck

Cynthia: What is your secret to growing a great garden?

Andy: As you know, Cynthia, working the soil is the most important work you can do for your garden. We compost and maintain the compost regularly to "harvest" soil twice a year.

Cynthia: Can you explain how you compost?



Compost bin filled with chipped garden waste

Andy: When I came to California from Germany I bought a chipper for composting. Kitchen scraps, weeds, flowers (except for roses because they have thorns), leaves, and grass are composted. I water it occasionally and then let it sit for four or five months. Before I use it, I add chicken manure, Monterey beach sand, and two bags of regular gardening soil. It makes a nice mix. When it looks and feels ready, we "harvest" this new soil and spread it around the yard. I get about 24 cubic feet each time.

Cynthia: Have you always gardened, Andy?

Andy: I did a little gardening when I was living in Germany. When I was 19, I bought a piece of land to later build my house on and my uncle asked if he could use it as a garden meanwhile. He taught me to garden. We grew mainly lettuce, potatoes, and strawberries.

Cynthia: Tomatoes are one of your favorite crops and you grow ample amounts. Lamorinda isn't the best area for tomatoes, how do you do it?



Andy: First of all, as I already stated, I compost and enrich the soil twice a year. I irrigate with drip, which helps to keep down the weeds. For my tomatoes, I keep only one stem, letting the stem grow tall, breaking off any leaves that are close to the ground to keep



Wire cloth helps to keep gophers out

the plants clean and disease free. If a leaf turns brown, I cut it off. Lots of sunshine and air circulation are key to success. My gopher barrier has also been successful because gophers are smart. It's important that every corner is wired. We harvested over 200 pounds of tomatoes this season and we've been eating them from July through November. There is nothing better than this!

Cynthia: What about your giant sunflowers?

Andy: I can't take credit for the sunflowers. Last year Eric Dausman gave me some plants he had grown from seeds. I planted them and grew gigantic sunflowers. I was lucky to capture a photo of a squirrel dining on the sunflower "balcony."

Cynthia: Any final tips for our readers?

The best part of gardening is being in nature. Everyday we spend at least 20 minutes walking around the garden seeing what's new and changed. We become one with the garden. Gardening is a huge pleasure. We eat berries for breakfast, add cucumbers to our salads, eat tomatoes right off the vine, and experiment cooking zucchini in many different ways. Everything is healthy, and tastes better fresh. And I like being green, knowing we are doing our part to keep pollution at a minimum.

Cynthia: Thanks Andy for all this useful information. All gardeners enjoy sharing their bounty and we benefit from your experiences.

How does your garden grow? Follow Andy's tips and you'll be smiling this time next year.

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