

May 2019 Newsletter

The window is open and a warm, delicious little breeze comes wandering in. It smells of magnolias and dogwood and it whispers in our ears enticing little stories of gurgling brooks and cool woods. Yes, we have got spring fever and got it bad.

~Country Life, June 1922



Upcoming

May 18 - ANNUAL PLANT SALE, 9:00 - 10:30am, Stewart School, Sunset Blvd, Perth

June 11 - Master Gardeners Q & A, Summer Social

July & August - Garden tours (dates and locations to be announced).

Plant Sale

Date: Saturday, May 18
9:00am – 10:30 am
The Stewart School Gym

We will need help to set up and receive, price and position plants on Friday 17th from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. Help to unite willing gardeners with suitable plants on Saturday 18th from 9:00 to 10:30am.

More than this, we need your plants. When dividing perennials please pot up any excess for our plant sale. Surplus annuals, shrubs and trees can also be sold.

Accurate labeling is important too. Plant name, sun or shade, mature size, blooming period and flower colour all help our customers make the right decision. Please put the label on a stick so

that the customer can read it as the pots will be on the floor.

If you have any questions call David Archer at 613-283-1032.

Black Earth: Not What You Think

By Larry Hodgson

Gardeners seem to believe that the darker a soil is, the better it is. And that does tend to be true in many cases. But not always.

In my part of the world (North-eastern North America), there is a product widely sold as "black earth" that is very popular with gardeners. It is also very cheap. I'd like to say dirt cheap, but it's actually cheaper than "dirt" (top-soil). It's sold by the bagful in garden centers, hardware stores and even supermarkets where people load up their trunks with what they think is top-quality soil at rock-bottom prices. They're very unlikely to be happy with the results.

Of course, this product isn't black earth. Black earth (the real stuff) is a type of soil officially called chernozem. It's very rich in humus, chock full of NPK and ideal for growing most nutrient-



Lanark Orchid

Renals

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dependent plants, including vegetables. It's usually found in what were originally low-lying, marshy areas, now mostly drained and being used for agriculture. If you really could get your hands on true black earth at a reasonable price, it would be wonderful: pretty much the ideal garden soil!

But the stuff sold as black earth is not chernozem, at least not in the eastern part of the continent (I'm sorry I can't generalize: the term "black earth" can mean different things in different areas). In fact, it isn't soil at all, but black peat, a very dark-colored type of peat found at the bottom of sphagnum peat bogs, under the more widely used blond peat (the top layer) used in most quality potting mixes and the somewhat decomposed brown peat moss (middle layer), a lesser quality peat used mostly in soil mixes for outdoor gardens.

Black peat, also called peat humus, is the lowest quality peat. It contains no fiber and, unlike other peats, compacts readily and doesn't hold nutrients well. It needs to be amended with limestone for most garden uses, as its pH is much too low for most plants. It can be useful for amending clay soils (if you can get it to mix with clay: good luck with that!) and sandy soils, but its effects don't last. Blond or brown peat are much better choices for this use.

But "black earth" (black peat or peat humus) remains popular in the soil packaging industry ... essentially as a colorant. No, packaging people will never say that, but that's pretty much the case. They know gardeners associate a dark soil color with good quality soils, so ... give the people what they want.

The problem is, you never know what you're getting with a product labeled "black earth." Hopefully, the manufacturer added some limestone to the product to bring the pH up to an acceptable level and if so, that would be listed on the package. You should never try growing plants in this. Yet the label says "earth" in big letters and many people assume that means they can use it directly from the bag for containers, vegetable gardens, etc. And that will lead to disaster. Very few plants will survive for long in black earth if it's just limed decomposed peat moss.

Other "black earth" products do contain topsoil and may be labeled "black earth soil", "black garden soil" or "black earth topsoil." They're slightly better, but again, you'd probably be better off with regular topsoil, which is usually

amended with higher quality brown peat.

In a nutshell, "black earth," unless you are certain you are really getting true chernozem (and that may be possible in certain parts of the world) is at best a lower quality product, certainly not the quality product many gardeners think it is. At worst, it's strictly a soil amendment and not "earth" that you should try growing plants in. Personally, I avoid it like the plague.

But black earth will probably continue to be a big seller because people remain convinced dark soils are the best. But if black earth really were the best product, why is it always the cheapest "soil" on the market? And why is it always on sale?

I know your mama told you this, but it's worth reminding you from time to time: you get what you pay for!

June Flower Show

Section I: Horticultural Specimen

- Class 1** Any peony – 1 stem
- Class 2** A collection of peonies – at least 3
- Class 3** Bearded Iris – 1 spike
- Class 4** Siberian Iris – 1 spike
- Class 5** Any rose – 1 stem or spray
- Class 6** Hosta – one cultivar – 3 leaves
- Class 7** Any other perennial – named – 3 stems
- Class 8** Collection of herbs – minimum 3 – named

Section II: Design

- Class 9** *Barn Dance* – a design using weathered wood
- Class 10** *Lines* – a modern design
- Class 11** *Reflections* – a design using a mirror(s)
- Class 12** *Pik'n Plunk* – arrangement using only foliage displayed in a vase

Growing Basil & Other May Gardening Tips

*Leonard Perry, UVM Horticulturist
and Charlie Nardozi, Garden Consultant*

Growing the herb basil, reseeding bare spots in lawns, and mulching walkways are some of the gardening activities for this month.

Basil is the best known of the Italian herbs and, with parsley, the most grown herb. Sweet or Genovese is the most popular species, grown for

its large leaves used in sandwiches, pizzas and pesto making. Another warm season favorite use is in a simple, Italian caprese salad consisting of slices of tomato and mozzarella, topped with basil leaves and a vinaigrette or Italian dressing. When buying sweet basil plants, or seeds to start, look for ones resistant to fusarium disease such as Aroma 2, Nufar, Plenty or ProEasy. Similar to Aroma 2 is the new Prospera, which also has resistance to downy mildew disease, as does Pesto Party. If you don't find such disease resistant cultivars, just make sure to plant basil plants right after the last frost (they're quite cold sensitive), so that you can harvest leaves prior to any diseases appearing.

There are other variations on basil, such as Mrs. Burns lemon basil with a piquant lemon flavor—unusual in basil; Thai lemon basil, or lime basil. Cinnamon or Mexican basil has an aroma as its name indicates. There are purple-leaved cultivars such as Dark Opal and Purple Ruffles—good used as ornamental foliage plants. There is even a variegated cultivar—Pesto Perpetuo—with thin, white leaf margins. Other basil varieties are globe shaped or short—about one foot tall—so grow well in containers. Boxwood, Spicy Globe, Dolce Fresca, and Minette are examples of these compact basil varieties.

When you transplant annual flowers and veggies from cell-packs or small containers, loosen the roots (often called "root balls") if they are quite root-bound—often the case. If roots form a solid mass and are tightly interwoven, either tease them apart gently with a fork or similar tool, or make a couple slits in the sides. Cutting through these roots will cause them to branch and grow new ones. If you don't loosen such root masses, they may never grow out into surrounding soil, keeping the plants stunted, and you'll find the roots in the same shape in fall.

Before reseeding bare spots in the lawn, spread 1 to 2 inches of compost over the areas and firm it down. Then sow grass seed. Sprinkle a thin layer of compost on top of the seed, cover with straw and keep it moist. This is a case where light, frequent (at least daily) watering is good. If you have pets, to deter them, encircle the spots with stakes string or mesh netting.

Reduce the weeds in walkways in your garden by covering the soil with some type of mulch. Some people like to use several sheets of moistened newspaper topped with straw (not hay, as it often has weed seeds), especially if you move your planting areas around a bit from year to

year. Try to avoid tilling to remove weeds because the process brings up weed seeds from deeper in the soil and exposes them to the light they need to grow. If you have permanent paths, such as between raised beds, you can use a weed fabric material under mulch.

There are so many other garden activities for this month, such as putting hummingbird feeders out early in the month, waiting until after the last frost and soils warm to plant warm-season crops such as melons and squash and cucumbers, and having frost protection handy for tomatoes. While it is good to shop early for the best selection of annual flowers, particular new ones, wait to plant them until after the last usual frost date—often the end of the month.

(Charlie Nardozi is a nationally known horticulturist, author, gardening consultant, and garden coach; gardeningwithcharlie.com).

Climate Change In The Garden: Too Much Water

Dr. Leonard Perry

No matter where you are in the country, or whether a gardener or not, one climate extreme that is becoming more frequent is that of too much water. The saying that "when it rains, it pours" is, unfortunately, becoming more applicable now than ever. There are several options with garden practices, plant choices, and landscaping elements that will help your plants survive. Even if you experience a severe flood, it's important to know how to recover your landscape and gardens.

Projections show that by the end of the century we may see 7 to 14 percent greater rain and snow, the higher figure under higher emissions. Yet, at the same time, we'll likely see more short-term droughts between rainy periods—another extreme to deal with.

Much of this precipitation increase is predicted to occur in winter, ranging from 11 to 30 percent more than now. More rain or mixed precipitation and less snow is predicted for winters, which will influence overwintering of perennials, among other impacts. This loss could be one quarter to one half of our current snow-covered days. Snow is one of the best protections in winter for herbaceous perennials. Less snow may lead to more plant losses, and actually the ability to grow fewer perennials than now in areas with sufficient and reliable winter snow cover.

Overall snow cover in the Northern hemisphere, particularly the far north, has declined each year since 1986 except one, with a steep decline since 2003 (Rutgers University snow lab).

Consequences of too much water include springtime flooding delaying planting; root damage and reduced yields; soil loss from erosion and silt deposits when land floods; and contamination of water from runoff. So, what can gardeners do, in addition to getting a good pair of boots, to prepare their gardens and landscapes for more water? These tips are particularly relevant if you have soils or areas that tend to stay wet and soggy after downpours, or that may even flood periodically.

Choose tolerant plants for wet areas. While few plants tolerate permanently wet soils (except water and bog plants), Siberian iris, Joe Pye, turtlehead, foxglove, ligularia (shade) and astilbe (shade) are some perennials for wet soils, the latter two preferring not to dry out. River birch, hackberry, green ash, swamp white oak, pin oak, willow, and bald cypress are some trees for wet soils. Red chokeberry, summersweet clethra, shrub dogwood, winterberry, and red osier willow are some shrubs for wet soils.

Use raised beds to grow above the wet soil; the longer the soil stays wet, the higher the bed should be (one foot or more). Grow shrubs or trees on slight mounds.

Avoid working on soils while wet, as this will destroy soil structure. What's too wet? A ball of soil in your hand should hold together, but crumble when pressed and not ooze water.

It's hard to add too much organic matter, such as compost, to soils, particularly if they're sandy or gravelly. In addition to helping the soil dry out more quickly, organic matter improves soil physical properties and helps feed beneficial soil microbes. Minimizing, or even avoiding, soil tillage (using a spading or broad fork to loosen soil is better) preserves soil structure which, in turn, helps it to recover more quickly after heavy rain.

Incorporate drain pipes or tiles to help remove water from areas if they are the only choices for planting, and there is somewhere to redirect excess water. Reduce stormwater runoff from paved surfaces by using permeable pavers and surfaces. These work on surfaces that don't slope more than one foot over a horizontal distance of 20 feet. While you might create such walks and patios yourself, a professional landscaper is best for large surfaces such as driveways made of

permeable pavers. If you have steps up a slope, or need to make some, consider permeable ones for infiltration.

Create rain gardens as a destination to hold water from heavy rain events, allowing it to percolate back into the soil over time (www.groundwater.org/action/home/raingardens.html), or vegetated swales to treat water flowing through an area. Even simpler than a swale is a diversion ditch or channel, filled with gravel or pebbles. These are what often are placed under the drip-line of roofs. Use attractive large pebbles or river stones to create an attractive creek bed feature in your landscape.

Another runoff option might be to simply dig a small pond where water can flow during a heavy rain, even if the pond doesn't have water all year. Such catchment ponds sometimes are seen near parking lots to catch runoff.

Use rain barrels or similar holding tanks to collect water during heavy rains to use later. Many prefer not to use such runoff from roofs on edible crops, as it may contain pollutants. Consider installing green roofs on sheds or garages to slow and reduce runoff. Avoid removing too much vegetation from slopes, to avoid erosion during heavy rains. If you have a fresh slope, add vegetation such as grasses or cover crops. If you want or need to plant them, consider terracing using wood, stones or hardscape materials if the slope is steep.

There's not much you can do if an area is flooded except to be patient, and hope that the water subsides soon. After a flood, once the soil is somewhat dry, remove it from beds and around plants, wearing gloves if pollutants from elsewhere may have been brought in. If any plant parts were underwater, wash them off with the hose.

Watch for signs of diseases; also watch for nutrient deficiency, fertilizing as appropriate or using foliar feeding (spray fertilizer onto leaves). For edible plants, destroy greens, produce eaten raw, and any other vegetables near to harvest. Wait until next season to grow crops, that are to be cooked, on that site. Wait two seasons to grow salad crops or those to be eaten raw, so potential diseases can leave the soil.

While it's difficult to fully recover a landscape or garden after heavy rains and flooding, these preventative measures and choices will help your plants to better cope. You'll also be minimizing the negative impacts of water runoff.