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Law Office 101

Savage Garden

Looks like we all dodged another gumm't shutdown. As a typical member of Club Fed, living hand-to-mouth, I really can't afford any unpaid vacations, so I got to thinking that what I really need is an additional source of income. By happy coincidence I was approached by a powerful TM People kingpin intent on taking me to task for my sloth. Turns out I haven't produced a column for this rag in months. I quickly figured that a cushy TM People gig would be an easy way to pull in a bit of extra coin, and craftily signed on for another 50 issues. Heh, money woes: over! Oh, wait....how much do I get per issue? D'oh! Well, maybe I can save some grocery money by planting a garden.

Before you can actually garden, you must make a garden, and that's the hard part because that's the part that involves the real work. To make a garden that's not in the forest, you must first remove a section of lawn. One way to do that is to cut the grass very close to the dirt and then just dig the remaining lawn into the soil using a rented tiller, or a pick and/or a shovel, and your sweat. And sweat there will be, because laboratory soil analysis of the area has determined that there is no actual soil in the D.C. Metro area, only large rocks and tree roots in about equal proportions. If you choose the "dig the whole mess into the ground" method you will find grass trying to grow back into the garden for a few years until you manage to weed it all out, so you have to pay attention so the grass and weeds do not get out of hand. Another method involves essentially scraping the lawn and its roots off the dirt using a flat garden shovel or a power tool made for this purpose. This way you can re-use these lawn slices in other places in your yard, plus you won't have so many grass weeds in your garden. But this is very labor-intensive, and I've never tried it because of, you know, the laziness.

Once you've removed the grass from your future garden site, you must dig the soil to a depth of about 24 inches to loosen it (I suggest a plastic explosive). You should then mix compost (rotted leaves, grass clippings, manure, etc.) into the soil and put an additional inch or two of compost on the top. You're trying to recreate the forest floor. You can also mix sand into the soil, if it is heavy with clay, or mix lime or wood ashes or any alkaline material into it if your soil is too acidic. Most veggies and plants grow best in an alkaline soil, except for a few acid-loving, hippie plants like azaleas, holly, and berries. Your bed should be no more than 3 or 4 feet wide so you can weed and pick your vegetables and flowers without stepping on the bed. You don't want to compact the soil. If you have to step on your bed for some reason, place a board under where you are going to step to distribute your weight over a larger area.

If, after you've dug out all the rocks and tree roots, you find you have only a large hole, you'll have to import dirt for your garden. Your options include night raids on the neighbors' gardens, buying bags of topsoil from some big box store, or having someone drop off a large mound on your driveway or front lawn. Bags of topsoil are generally sold in 40-pound bags for about $1.50 - $3 a bag, and you'll need about 100,000 of them to fill the average garden bed. The big mound 'o dirt option is very shovel/wheelbarrow intensive, so I suggest: family project. If you go with the mound, be careful as to the quality of dirt you buy. Don't just ask for "topsoil." That's code for "give him anything, he doesn't have a clue." You must ask for "garden quality" topsoil, or specify a mix of topsoil to compost. 50-50 is fine if that will constitute the whole bed. If you just want to add some organic material to your existing topsoil, make it all compost. If you need to add just a bit more topsoil plus organic matter, perhaps 20-80. Most nurseries around here have compost and will deliver it mixed with topsoil to whatever percentage you want. A cubic yard of soil (or a cubic yard of anything for that matter) is 27 cubic feet, and nurseries will usually not deliver less than three to five cubic yards, which is a lot of dirt. But you'll be surprised how fast it goes.

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Once your garden bed is filled with fluffy, compost-packed soil so that it's mounded 12-18 inches higher than the surrounding soil, and you have been discharged from the hospital after recovering from complications that arose from moving all that dirt, you are ready to plant. Around here the general rule is that plants that can tolerate a slight frost or two can go into the ground around the end of March or early April. These cold-tolerant plants include peas, potatoes, lettuce, radishes, broccoli, cabbage, and beets. You can put in veggies and flowers that can't tolerate cold, such as tomatoes, beans, squash, melons, corn, and most flowers about the first week of May or so. You may notice as you plug the plants and seed into the ground, that you have attracted a growing audience of happy woodland creatures. If you look closer, you may notice that they are all putting on little woodland bibs and have in their paws little woodland eating utensils. You see, as far as they and all their insect friends are concerned, you are merely the manager of the local Safeway. There are many things you can do about this depending on who your customers turn out to be. For small animal infestations, get a dog or cat. Some people claim human hair clippings will keep animals away, but having little to spare, I don't know about that.

As for insects, you usually have to know something about their life cycles to control them. For example, if you plant spinach too early in the year, whiteflies will lay their eggs on the underside of the spinach leaves and their larvae called leaf miners will get inside the leaves and ruin them. The answer is to plant spinach at the time the white flies are flying around or just before so they do not have any spinach leaves to lay their eggs under. A mixture of soap (not detergent) and water will kill many small insects; the fat in the soap coats their bodies and they cannot breathe. I don't know much about insects so I just plant more vegetables than I need. The bugs will take their share, and I usually end up with about what I wanted. If you want to know about specific insects or you just like to talk bugs, we have several entomologists in the Office who will be happy to oblige you. Of course they must remain anonymous, as none of them want folks to know of their bizarre, cult-like interests, for obvious reasons.

The easiest way to control weeds is not to let them grow in the first place. Knock down the baby weeds with a hoe before they get too big and you shouldn't have much of a problem. Some folks use mulch, such as shredded hardwood or straw to control weeds. That's not such a great idea as it turns out that plant-killing molds and fungus grow in the mulch, and wood mulch is very acidic as it breaks down – not so good for most plants. So what should you use? In a recent study at Ohio State University, they kept track of "weeding hours" for plots that were mulched with either 2" of compost or 2" of wood mulch, and there was no difference between the two. And the compost feeds the plants at the same time – bonus! Or you can just plant your veggies closer together than is recommended. As the plants get bigger their leaves will touch and they'll act as a kind of living mulch. Yes, your individual vegetables will be slightly smaller but because the plants are closer together, you'll have planted more of them. I think you come out ahead, or at least you'll break even and you won't have to weed as much. Also, planting closer together allows less water to evaporate from the soil so you'll conserve water too, and that can't be bad.

So it turns out I get exactly $0.00 for each column I write. No problem. I'll just make up for that in volume. Where's my calculator? TM