

field notes.

SOIL FOR EAST TEXAS GARDENERS

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Your garden's success truly starts from the ground up. Soil plays a major role in how well a garden performs. Our region is known for its distinctive red clay soil—rich in nutrients, but often dense, compacted, and challenging to work with. Anyone who has tried digging in the middle of a Texas summer understands just how tough it can become. Despite those challenges, soil is one of the most important foundations of successful gardening. When you understand your soil and learn how to work with it rather than against it, you create healthier plants, stronger roots, and more productive gardens for years to come.

Understanding East Texas Red Clay Soil

Red Clay Soil is the signature soil type across much of East Texas. It is heavy, tightly packed, and holds moisture extremely well. During wet periods, it can become sticky and slow to drain. During dry weather, it hardens and develops deep cracks as it loses moisture.

Challenges: drainage, soil compaction, limited airflow to roots, slower root development

Hidden Advantages: While clay soil can be challenging, it also has significant benefits. Clay soils are naturally rich in minerals and retain nutrients far better than sandy soils. With proper amendments and soil management, East Texas clay can become an excellent foundation for productive vegetable gardens, healthy flowers, and thriving landscapes.

Step 1: Test Your Soil

- Before you start amending your soil, know what you're working with.
- Use a soil test kit (for a small fee through our county extension office).
- Learn your soil's pH and identify nutrient gaps (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium).

Step 2: Improve Drainage & Structure

- Clay soil needs air pockets and organic matter to open it up.
- Add compost: Builds structure, adds life, improves drainage.
- Mix in expanded shale: Helps break up compaction.
- Raised beds: Build up soil instead of fighting the clay.

Step 3: Use Typical Amendments for East Texas Soil

- **Compost:** #1 amendment—adds organic matter, nutrients, and microbes.
- **Expanded Shale:** A lightweight rock that improves aeration and drainage in heavy clay.
- **Aged Manure** (cow, chicken, or horse): Boosts fertility when well-composted.
- **Gypsum:** Helps reduce compaction and improves soil structure over time.
- **Coco Coir:** Can improve water retention and loosens texture. Often used instead of peat moss.
- **Sand:** Use sparingly and only with compost—never add sand alone (makes clay feel like concrete).
- **Worm Castings:** Rich in nutrients and beneficial microorganisms
- **Wood Ash:** Increases potassium levels and raises pH
- **Perlite:** Lightweight, volcanic rock that improves drainage and aeration in potting mixes.
- **Vermiculite:** mineral that improves texture, water absorption, and drainage improving aeration.

BONUS TIP: *Add amendments a few inches deep and work them into the top 6–8 inches of soil before planting.*

Step 4: Feed the Soil Life

- Healthy soil is alive and filled with microbes, fungi, and worms that work for you.
- Mulch regularly: Protects and feeds the soil as it breaks down.
- Plant cover crops (like clover or rye): Adds organic matter and prevents erosion.

Step 5: Choose the Right Plants

- Some plants thrive in East Texas clay with minimal fuss.
- Veggies that do well: Tomatoes, peppers, okra, squash, beans.
- Landscape winners: Crape myrtles, hydrangeas, azaleas, hollies.
- Work with your soil, not against it—pick plants that love East Texas.

Step 6: Build Healthy Habits

- Water smart: Deep, less frequent watering encourages roots to go deeper.
- Fertilize wisely: Clay holds nutrients, so you may need less than sandy-soil gardeners.
- Refresh beds each season: Add 2–3 inches of compost or mulch annually.

Soil Checklist for New Gardeners



Get to Know Your Soil

- Do a soil test (our county extension office)
- Check pH and nutrient gaps
- Note drainage: Does water sit or run off quickly?



Prep the Ground

- Clear weeds, rocks, and debris
- Loosen compacted clay with a shovel, fork, or tiller
- Decide: in-ground bed, raised bed, or containers



Add Key Amendments only if needed

- Mix in 2–3 inches of compost (every new garden loves this!)
- Add expanded shale or pine bark fines for better drainage
- Use aged manure or organic fertilizer for nutrients
- Consider gypsum if your soil is super hard and compacted
- Never add sand alone—it can make clay harder to manage!



Build Healthy Soil Habits

- Mulch 2–3 inches deep after planting to protect soil
- Add compost every season to feed soil life
- Water deeply but less often (encourages strong roots)



Plant Smart

- Choose clay-tolerant plants (tomatoes, peppers, okra, crape myrtles, hydrangeas)
- Use raised beds or containers for fussier crops
- Rotate veggies each season to keep soil balanced

BONUS TIP: Healthy soil isn't built in a day. It's built over seasons. Start with compost and mulch, then keep adding organic matter every year. Your garden will thank you.

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MULCH FOR EAST TEXAS GARDENERS

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Mulch is like a gardener's secret weapon—it protects your plants, enriches your soil, and keeps your garden looking sharp. The trick is knowing which mulch works best and how to use it.

Why Mulch Matters

- **Moisture Control:** Keeps soil from drying out in the Texas heat.
- **Weed Control:** Blocks sunlight, making it harder for weeds to sprout.
- **Soil Health:** Organic mulches break down, feeding your soil.
- **Temperature Balance:** Keeps roots cooler in summer, warmer in winter.
- **Aesthetic Appeal:** Gives beds a neat, finished look.

Types of Mulch for East Texas

Shredded Hardwood Mulch (undyed)

- Best all-around choice.
- Breaks down slowly, improves soil, and blends naturally into landscapes.

Pine Bark, Cedar Bark & Other Tree Barks

- Repels some insects thanks to natural oils.
- Smells great and looks polished.

Wood Chips

- Affordable, great for pathways and large spaces.
- Use aged chips—fresh ones may tie up nitrogen.

Composted Leaves (Leaf Mold)

- Excellent for soil health and water retention.
- Free if you save your fall leaves!

Pine Needles

- Great for acid-loving plants (azaleas, blueberries).
- Lightweight and airy, but may blow around in wind.

How to Mulch Like a Pro

1. **Prep First:** Clear weeds and water soil before laying mulch.
2. **Depth Matters:** Spread 2–3 inches deep—any more and roots may suffocate.
3. **Don't Smother Stems:** Keep mulch a few inches away from plant bases and tree trunks to prevent rot.
4. **Top Off Regularly:** Mulch breaks down over time; add fresh layers each season.

Mulch to Avoid

- **Dyed Mulch:** Chemicals may leach into your soil.
- **Fresh Grass Clippings:** Can mat down, smell, and attract pests.
- **Thick Plastic Sheeting:** Suffocates soil life.

Pro Tips for East Texas Gardens

- Use shredded hardwood mulch for veggie beds—it balances moisture in hot summers.
- Try mixing compost and shredded leaves under your mulch layer for a soil super-boost.
- Refresh pine needles under hydrangeas or azaleas in spring for happy blooms.

Mulch isn't just a pretty cover-up. It's one of the best tools to protect, feed, and boost your garden all year long.

Mulch Checklist for New Gardeners



Prep Before You Mulch

- Pull weeds and clear out debris
- Water the soil well
- Edge garden beds for a clean look



Apply Mulch the Right Way

- Spread mulch 2–3 inches deep
- Keep mulch 2–3 inches away from plant stems and tree trunks
- Use a rake or hands to smooth it evenly



Mulch Choices (Pick What Fits Your Garden)

- Shredded hardwood mulch (best all-around)
- Tree bark mulch
- Wood chips (great for paths and large spaces)
- Pine needles (perfect for azaleas, blueberries, hydrangeas)



What to Avoid

- Dyed mulches (chemicals can leach into soil)
- Fresh grass clippings (smelly, can attract pests)
- Plastic sheeting under mulch (blocks soil life)



Seasonal Maintenance

- Check mulch depth every few months
- Top off once or twice a year as it breaks down
- Refresh pine needles in spring for acid-loving plants

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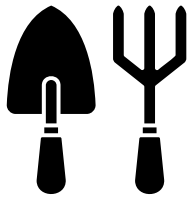
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Don't Plant Too Early (or Too Late)

Trust us! East Texas weather can be tricky. Plant too early, a freeze will kill your plants. Plant too late, and the heat will stop them from thriving.



Water Deep, Not Daily.

Roots go where the water goes and you want strong roots that are deep. Train them to dig deep and your plants will be so much happier (and so will you).



Mulch heavy.

Keeps your soil cool in the summer and warm in the winter with mulch. Your plants will like it and your weeds won't like it. Plus, it looks pretty and who doesn't like pretty things in the garden

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