

## Down to the earth

Monday, 23 November 2009

Gardening conversations always pitch back to the ground. We are obsessed with mud and it seems that the more work required to improve soil, the better. Bad backs prove that you take the task seriously, that you're no fly-by-night gardener. Are we creating a rod for our own backs with borders that become bottomless pits filled with plants that just don't like our soil type? There is a wealth of plants suitable for your ground no matter what it is, and working within the limitations of your garden can be a liberating experience.

### Soil types

Sandy ground is pretty obvious: it's light brown in colour and feels very gritty. Chalky soil drains exceedingly quickly and is sometimes lumpy. Clay feels wet and sticky and is often waterlogged.

It is becoming increasingly popular, particularly with weekend gardeners or busy families, to use a minimum of effort in this area. The theory is that digging the ground is completely unnatural and actually harms the soil's structure and micro-life.

After cultivating once, a thick layer of mulch — farmyard manure, compost or other organic matter — is spread over the soil's surface once a year so worms can take it down into the earth naturally.

Unless you want to become a slave to the spade once more, you should never walk on these beds again. To ensure weeding is not a problem, no-dig borders should be kept small. The principle really lies in the fact that the majority of a plant's feeding roots grow within the top 8–10cm of the soil, so in theory this is all that needs to be cultivated.

The key to real success is in selecting plants that thrive in your soil type. Once these plants have been selected, then the time you formerly spent battling with the earth can be spent sitting back and enjoying its fruits. Whether you agree with the no-dig principle or not, you've got to admit that using plants that actually enjoy your soil conditions is sensible, yet so many of us completely ignore this fact. So if you haven't already, admit defeat.

### Chalk choices

Admittedly, chalky soil is low in nutrients, excessively free draining and once investigated further reveals a layer that is more rock than soil. Throwing organic mulch on to the topsoil twice a year will improve it, but it will remain unreasonably alkaline. Any notions of acid-loving plants must be ruled out. But there are a host of plants that will thrive in such conditions: achillea flowers, verbascum, aquilegias, gleditsia triacanthus (honey locust), ash, laburnum and whitebeam — just some.

If you can't resist the allure of rhododendrons, camellias and other lime haters, then the best bet is to grow them in pots.

Clay seems to be the biggest bugbear. It's wet, sticky and impossible to dig in winter, cracked, rock-solid and just as difficult in summer. But take heart in the knowledge that this unruly clay is stacked full of nutrients and therefore is exceptionally fertile. If you choose your plants well, then they'll undoubtedly flourish.

The bright intensity of helenium Moerheim Beauty could be jostling with rudbeckia fulgida (goldsturm), in turn vying for your attention against solidago. Set among a backdrop of fragrant philadelphus and the early blooming, equally fragrant, magnolia stellata, your clay garden will be burgeoning with bloom. Clay soils seem to support the most resplendent of blooms.

So stop battling to cultivate your land in a desperate attempt to grow plants that are just not at home in your space and find those that revel in the conditions your garden provides.