

Seriously, with a bit of both you too can have a fabulous garden. Plants are just like us; they are what they eat. Feed your soil the good stuff and you'll have a rich, well amended soil that will help to produce healthy and beautiful plants and nutritious vegetables. Everything starts with the soil and here in the South Carolina Lowcountry, our soils run the gamut from pure sand to heavy clay with the ideal being somewhere in the middle of the range. Fortunately, everyone can commit to improve the growing conditions in their gardens. It is just like you getting the appropriate vitamins and minerals from your food. The confidence comes with time and experience and there is help available. Never give up.

Like overeating, over fertilization can be a problem on many levels, from soil toxicity to actually polluting our wetlands, so an inexpensive, \$6.00, soil test is always advised. All it takes is a pint of soil from your garden. If you have different areas, bring a sample of each area you want to test. Bring it to the Clemson Extension Service office in the Beaufort Industrial Village, Building 1 on Burton Hill Road, or to the Master Gardener's Booth at the Port Royal Farmer's Market, and they will take care of the rest. Additional information on soil tests can be found at the Clemson HGIC website at <http://www.clemson.edu/extension/hgic/plants/other/soils/hgic1652.html>

You will also want to incorporate organic matter into the soil. This will help the sandy soils to retain moisture and the clay soils to become more friable. Even if you are blessed with good topsoil, organic materials will improve it even more. A win-win for all. Examples would be purchased or homemade compost, dry leaves, well aged manures, grass clippings, to name a few. This material should be turned into your soils, and don't worry, you it can't overdo it. I make my own compost with garden waste and kitchen scraps, but I also supplement it with mushroom compost, inexpensive and readily available at your local garden centers, incorporating it whenever I plant something and top dressing existing plants.

A healthy soil also attracts earthworms. These critters offer multiple advantages to our gardens. As they tunnel through the ground, they leave open spaces, which allow oxygen to get to the plant roots. Their castings are rich in nutrients for your plants and they also give off chitin, which has natural pesticidal properties.

Now that your soil is prepared, April is prime planting time for warm season veggies like tomatoes, corn, beans, cucumbers, squash, eggplant, melons and of course, herbs. If you have not grown your own vegetables before, maybe this is the year to start. Clemson's HGIC also offers extensive planting and growing information. Remember, vegetables want a full sun

exposure, at least 6 hours a day for the best production. Read those plant labels at the nursery; they give the eventual size, space requirements and sun exposure needs. Some vegetables are well suited for containers, and you can often take the hints from the names like “Better Bush” tomatoes. My six-year-old grandson recently filled bushel baskets with potting mix and planted bush cucumbers, his favorite vegetable.

The Port Royal Farmer’s Market opens Saturday, April 16, and the Lowcountry Master Gardeners will be available to answer all your gardening questions – to help build that confidence! – from 8:30 to 12:30.

Upcoming regional gardening events include:

4/23 – SC Native Plant Society Plant Sale. Charlestowne Landing, Charleston. www.scnps.org

4/29 – 4/30 – Plantasia, Charleston Horticultural Society’s Green Market, Wragg Square, Charleston. www.charlestonhorticulturalsociety.org

4/29 – 4/30 – Sacred Heart Garden Festival, Augusta, GA.
www.sacredheartgardenfestival.com

5/14 – Super Turf Saturday, Hampton Hall, Bluffton, SC for info call Bill Leonard at 843 540-3600.

6/6 – 6/10 – Beaufort Garden Club’s “Garden A Day” tour. Save the date.

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