

Caring for your garden

How successful your lawns and planting borders will be year after year is largely dependent on keeping the soil in your garden healthy. This means making sure that it contains enough air and nutrients and that water (rainfall and irrigation) can move freely through it.



Common issues with newly imported and placed soil

Compaction. This is where the spaces between the soil particles become compacted, resulting in a lack of air in the soil, slow drainage, potential waterlogging, and plant deaths.

Causes:

- Heavy trafficking by site machinery, vehicles and people
- Heavy rainfall
- The over-application of surface mulch (such as bark, woodchip, slate etc.)

Remedy—*Break up and shatter the compacted layer* manually with a garden fork, or aerate with a spike or plug aerator. *To find the depth of a compacted layer simply push a probe or garden fork into the soil/turf until resistance is encountered.*



Compacted soil



Manually aerating the soil with a garden fork



De-compacting soil under turf

Natural settlement. It is common for soil to experience a degree of settlement after it has been placed and cultivated.

Causes:

- The soil has been insufficiently consolidated or 'firmed down' after placing
- Where drainage has been installed, these areas can dry out more quickly, causing the soil to shrink and slump
- Heavy rainfall

Remedy—*Break up and loosen the soil before firming it down, and apply topsoil or topdressing to level up slumped areas. To raise topsoil levels in planting beds, simply add more topsoil and well-rotted organic matter between the plants, as required.*



Removing turf to raise soil level



Raising soil level beneath turf with topsoil or topdressing



Top dressing a lawn after aeration

Capping. When the aggregates making up the soil (i.e. sand, silt and clay) are broken apart by heavy rainfall the soil can form a crust or 'cap' on the surface.

Causes:

- Heavy rainfall
- Over-watering
- Walking on the soil when it's wet

Remedy—*Avoid handling or disturbing the topsoil more than is necessary, especially when it's wet, and build up the amount of organic matter in the soil by adding compost, leaf mould, well-rotted manure or horticultural grit.*



Topsoil 'capping'



Breaking up capped soil with a 3-prong cultivator



Organic matter added to soil

Helpful tips

- ◆ Lawns and planting areas should be de-compacted at least twice a year, in spring and autumn, in dry conditions;
- ◆ After de-compacting lawns with a fork or aerator, brush a topdressing into the holes to help keep the soil open, to feed the grass and to level any slumped areas. Divots and bare patches can be repaired by mixing grass seed with the topdressing before application;
- ◆ When de-compacting lawns and flower beds, try and work off boards to reduce compaction and to help keep the soil level correct;
- ◆ Breaking up 'capping' using a hand tool or cultivator will improve air flow, help young seedlings push through, and make weeding easier;
- ◆ All good topsoil will contain annual weed seeds. To control in flowerbeds, hand hoe or weed as soon as they emerge. In a newly-seeded lawn, mow as soon as possible to a height that cuts the growing point of the weed without scalping the grass. Seek professional advice if using herbicide.
- ◆ Yellowing or stunted growth of plants or grass can be an indication of nutrient deficiency in your soil. A simple soil testing kit from a garden centre will show you the levels of potassium, phosphorus and magnesium in your soil as well as its pH, indicating whether you have an acid or limey soil (important to know for plant selection). For a more in-depth soil analysis, contact a professional soil scientist (e.g. Tim O'Hare Associates—www.toha.co.uk)

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- ◆ [Society of Garden Designers—www.sgd.org.uk](http://www.sgd.org.uk)
- ◆ [British Association of Landscape Industries—www.bali.org.uk](http://www.bali.org.uk)