Gardening in the Red

Our red clay soils of North Georgia and Franklin County usually get a hard rap from newcomers. We, of course, know that our native soil isn't as bad as its reputation. Granted, it's not the dark, organic rich soils of the Midwest but we can grow some pretty impressive gardens.

Once newcomers finally get settled into their new homes and venture outside to begin working on the landscape, I usually get a phone call. "How do you grow anything in this darn red clay?" they ask.

Gardening in the red clay soil of Georgia is quite an adjustment for even experienced gardeners from other parts of the country. Many folks resort to the heavy use of soil amendments to try to recreate the rich black soils that are familiar to them. Unfortunately, the improper use of soil amendments can create some major problems.

If you hail from some other part of the country the natural inclination is to try to add large amounts of soil amendments to "improve" our red clay. Typically, new residents decide to add lots of peat and potting soil when backfilling individual planting holes. Several weeks or maybe even a month or two later they notice that the plant is not looking healthy.

There are usually two reasons why shrubs planted in heavily amended planting holes begin to decline. First, excessive soil amendments upset the moisture balance between the planting hole and the surrounding clay soil. The peat and other amendments retain lots of moisture compared to the surrounding clay. In a wet year you have essentially created the same conditions that you would see when placing a sponge in a clay pot. The planting hole tends to accumulate water and the plant develops "wet feet." This can result in root rots or at the very least reduced plant growth.

A second problem arises if the newly developing plant roots begin to follow the path of least resistance and circle around in the rich amended soil of the planting hole. In some instances the root system develops in a circular pattern and you are left with a plant that become almost "pot bound" in the ground.

For these reasons horticultural specialists with the University of Georgia Extension Service do not recommend heavily amending individual planting holes. Instead, prepare a large properly constructed planting hole and back fill it with native soil. This seems shocking to many gardeners but it is the recommended practice.

If, however, you are preparing annual beds or considering amending an entire lawn or garden area the recommendation is different. When an entire planting area is amended you don't have to worry about upsetting the moisture balance in the root zone of the plants. All of the soil in the bed has been amended so there is no great difference in the water holding capacity between the root zone and the surrounding soil.

In addition, the roots will spread freely through the bed area since there is no wall of heavily compacted clay to direct root growth back into a relatively small area of amended soil. The roots are free to roam at will.

If you are new to this area, just remember a few basic rules.

1. Be sure to soil test and add the recommended fertilizer and lime.
2. Dig a planting hole 2-2 1/2 times the size of the root ball.
3. Backfill individual planting holes with native soil.
4. Amendments should be used only when preparing the soil in beds or entire garden areas.