

Time to Debunk a Few Gardening Myths By Rachel Oppedahl

Guess which of these bits of gardening advice are true: putting sugar in the planting hole for tomatoes will make them sweeter; when planting a new tree, always stake it; beer makes a great lawn and garden fertilizer. The answer: not, not and not. Sometimes gardening folklore is silly—but harmless. Sometimes, the misconceptions can do more harm than good. With that in mind, here are a few gardening myths that need to go bye-bye.

Our clay soil is bad for gardening. Having used many choice four-letter words and thrown a few shovels across the yard after hours of trying to dig planting holes up here (I am a Bay Area transplant), I know too well how difficult our soil can be to work with. Yes, it's harder to dig (especially with all of the rock), and yes, too much clay in a soil can cause drainage and aeration problems for some plants. But the good news is clay happens to be a nutrient magnet for plants because its surface structure and chemical properties naturally attract many of the essential elements of plant nutrition, such as calcium, magnesium, potassium, hydrogen and iron, among others. "Because clay minerals are so active in nutrient exchanges," explains the *California Master Gardener Handbook*, "they are major determinants of the chemical and physical properties of a given soil, and they largely determine how well plants will grow in that soil." If you need to improve drainage in dense clay soil, work in organic compost.

The best way to plant is to fill the newly dug hole with soil amendments. Studies show that nothing is gained by amending backfill with store-bought garden soil, fertilizer or other substances. And some "amendment" practices can actually be harmful, like chucking a handful of fertilizer in the planting hole too close to the plant's roots, which can chemically burn them. Current research tells us that the best planting practice is to use the soil you just shoveled out as backfill and to use organic matter as mulch on top of the soil *after* planting to improve soil structure, conserve water and discourage weeds. This planting method will be especially successful if you dedicate much of your garden to native and/or Mediterranean plants, which are more suited to our soil and growing conditions. If you can't live without those exotic, fussy non-natives or want to grow vegetables, though, raised beds or pots with amended soil are often a must.

Use vitamin B1 when you plant to stimulate root growth. "Applying vitamin B-1, or thiamine, to root systems of whole plants does not stimulate root growth," says Linda Chalker-Scott, Ph.D., Extension Horticulturist and Associate Professor, Puyallup Research and Extension Center, Washington State University. "This is a myth that refuses to die, though it has been repeatedly refuted in the scientific literature." She stresses that healthy soil and adequate moisture are critical for successful planting and transplanting, but that plants inherently difficult to transplant ". . . may be aided by application of auxin-containing products in addition to nitrogen . . ." (Auxins are plant hormones involved in regulating plant growth, and are included in many of the commercially available rooting compounds.)

As for tree staking, beer and sugar? Swaying in the wind helps young tree trunks grow stronger, a small bowl of beer *does* make a great snail trap, and the sugar is better off in a tall glass of iced tea.

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