

Your garden in May

Gardening on clay

As a garden designer here in Essex, the one thing that many of my clients have in common is a heavy clay soil.

Although clay soils are often seen as being problematic, a good clay soil is one of the best soils you can have as it will grow just about any plant well. The key is to get it to a workable state with a good soil structure.

Clay particles are extremely small, they bind very closely together making it sticky and unworkable when wet, and rock hard when dry. It is slow to dry out and warm up in spring.



Clay should not be dug or even walked on when wet, as you will compress and smear it, leading to problems with compaction. Provided your soil is not wet (and many gardens are still very soggy after the strange spring weather we have had), May is the perfect time to work on improving your clay soil.

To open up the soil and improve aeration and drainage, add sharp sand or grit, mixing a 7.5cm (3in) layer into the top 15cm (6in) of the soil.

Next work in plenty of bulky organic matter, such as composted bark, straw, well-rotted manure or garden compost. This helps the tiny clay

particles clump together into bigger crumbs. The addition of lime to a clay soil can also help the clay particles bind together by a process called flocculation, but raises the soil pH so don't add lime if you want to grow acid-loving plants such as rhododendrons and azaleas.

Once you have prepared the ground for planting, the best way to preserve these improvements is to keep further digging to a minimum. Instead just regularly add a generous mulch of organic matter and let the worms and the natural process of decomposition do the rest.

The one advantage of a clay soil is that it is very fertile, not only does it contain nutrients itself, but it holds on to fertilisers that are applied to it. Shrubs that do particularly well on clay include *Berberis*, *Choisya*, *Cotoneaster*, privet (*Ligustrum*) *Osmanthus*, *Philadelphus*, lilac (*Syringa*), *Ribes* (flowering currant) *Viburnum*, and roses.

If you have clay soil but hanker after a herb garden, or one full of Mediterranean planting like lavender, then raised beds or pots are your best solution. These lift the planting level and allow you to add free-draining, gritty topsoil in which your plants will be much happier than cold wet clay.