

Topsoil: It's Not What You Think It Is

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When I say the word “topsoil,” what comes to mind? Most people immediately think of dark-colored, rich soil material. It should be chock-full of organic material and humus, and teeming with earthworms and beneficial microbes. Plants should just leap out of the ground when planted in this!

These people are often shocked and dismayed when they order “topsoil” and receive a truckload of brown or gray, blocky material, filled with rocks and weed seeds. This “topsoil” will harden and crack, just like clay. Search all you want, you won't find an earthworm or a drop of organic material. Did these gardeners get ripped off?

Unfortunately, no, they didn't. There is no legal definition for topsoil. Technically, topsoil is whatever is on top of the ground. If I'm digging a deep basement, I can take the clay from 10 feet down and sell it as topsoil, because at the moment I dug it, it was on top of the ground. In Evansville, most of the bulk topsoil is river bottom silt, scooped up from next to the Ohio River. Nobody sells “real” topsoil, because that would mean they took the time to scrape the upper 3 to 6 inches of a field and deliver it to you.

Even the bags of topsoil you buy at the garden center are not what I'd call true topsoil. Many of these products are mixtures of sand, compost, peat, manure, and who knows what else. There are probably no beneficial microbes living in this, especially if it's been sitting at the garden center for a few months.

When buying topsoil to fill a raised bed or a low area in the yard, always examine what is being sold before it is delivered. Be prepared to amend this with large amounts of organic matter before adding it to your yard or garden. I generally recommend one part organic material (compost, peat moss, etc.) to nine parts topsoil, giving you about a 10% organic content. This should be mixed thoroughly before applying it to your beds. There are some local farmers who sell a composted manure/soil mixture that is pretty much ready-to-use.

Be aware that all soil products will have weed seeds in them. If the bagged soil has been heat-treated to kill the weeds, this will also kill the beneficial microbes as well. Plan ahead to mulch these areas, or be prepared to use herbicides.

Finally, commercial topsoil is usually very low in mineral nutrients, so be prepared to fertilize it. Unless you are buying potting soil, there will be no added fertilizer in this material. You can do a soil test on your delivery if you want, but I'm going to bet that it will be deficient in all major plant nutrients, and will need organic matter as well.

You'll learn all about this and more at this fall's Master Gardener classes. For more information, contact the Purdue Extension Service at (812) 435-5287.