

Lasagna Beds

Shirley Glass-Soler

Lasagna Beds take their name from the layers one creates in constructing the bed. The technique has been around for a long time under different names. Ruth Stout, an early member of the Organic Gardening magazine team, introduced the practice to the masses as “no till gardening.” I remember it from my time on our family farm in Michigan as “sheet composting.” “Lasagna bed” is catchy and gives you an immediate mental picture of what you need to do and what the results will look like.

Whatever you choose to call the practice, it has particular relevance to Colorado with our poor soils and uncertain rainfall. Our soils are either sand or clay – none of the beautiful humus-filled loam of the Midwest. With respect to our rainfall patterns, sand is the worst in dry weather because it doesn't hold water and plants and their roots die of thirst; clay is worst during our monsoon season because it swells with water, pushes out air, and the plant roots rot. The best remedy for both conditions is humus. Humus soaks up water like a sponge. Humus is the dark, decomposed organic matter that results from the breakdown of leaves, grasses, weeds, vegetable kitchen waste (peels, roots, leaves) in short, any vegetable matter. Humus is more often called compost by the home gardener.

We are all familiar with compost and compost heaps. You build a pile of organic matter at least 4x4x4 feet in layers of green stuff, brown stuff (leaves), soil or inoculants, wait till it heats up, turn it, let it heat up, turn it, etc. and, after a year, dig it into your beds. There are circular composters with turning mechanisms that speed up the process, but you still have to dig it into your beds.

For a lasagna bed, you spread your materials directly on your beds or to-be-beds and you don't have to turn it. Even better – you don't have to laboriously dig the resulting compost into your heavy, rocky, clay soil! (My most prolific crop is rocks!)

To make a lasagna bed, start by collecting newspapers – lots of them – newsprint sections only – no slick inserts.

Collect organic matter that will break down over time. I drive through the alleys in my neighborhood in the fall and collect several truckloads of bagged leaves. You can use your or your neighbor's grass clippings, but not if the grass has been treated with a chemical weed control within 6 weeks. Residue from the veggie garden and kitchen can also be collected.

Identify your source of soil – any garden soil or commercial top soil or soil mix.

Start by spreading newspapers on your bed. If a brand new bed on weeds or grass, make the newspaper layer half an inch thick and overlap like shingles. If an existing bed, make the layer 4-8 sheets thick, still overlapping the sheets. If it's windy, wet the newspapers before you put them down.

Spread your organic matter on top of the newspapers; at least a foot deep for a new bed, 6-8 inches for an existing bed.

Spread 1 or 2 inches of soil on top of the organic materials, and then sprinkle some high-nitrogen fertilizer over the bed unless you have a good supply of green stuff (e.g., grass clippings) in the bed.

If there is no rain or snow, sprinkle with **water every 3 or 4 days** to keep moist. (You can start this step in the early spring to be ready for planting season.) In about 6 weeks, you will have a layer of pure compost over your garden bed. Plant your seeds or plants directly into the compost; they will grow like gangbusters! And did I mention that you never have to dig up your heavy clay soil?