

Prepare for Success

Your guide to a sustainable Australian garden

As gardeners in a dry climate, we face a range of challenges. Plant selection goes a long way to help drought proof the garden, but even the toughest plants may fail if ground preparation has not been carried out correctly.

It is all in the preparation!

Soil

‘Native plants like native soil’

Experience has shown that the most suitable soil for native plants is that in which they grow naturally. Unfortunately it tends to be compacted, either by heavy equipment in building construction, or by grazing animals.



The remedy is to rip on the contour 200-300 mm deep about 1m apart, in autumn, when the soil is dry. A bobcat or ‘Dingo Digger’ is ideal for this – even tricky small areas. The rip line catches run off and reduces erosion, retaining water on your property for your plants. The shattered ground also enables your plants to establish easily and root deeply. If you require additional soil for landscaping, either look out for excess soil from dam or house construction or contact a soil supplier, but insist on soil similar to your own.

Very free draining soil mix is not suitable for sustainable gardening as it requires very regular watering and tends to have excessive nutrients; over time, this soil may become water repellent.



What type of soil do you have?

The so-called “**sedimentary**” soils of Central Victoria consist of clay and weathered rock – retain the rocks as they hold moisture underneath them, rip on the contour and/or mound to improve drainage and enhance growth.



Granite soils are sandy (including non-wetting soils) – to grow natives other than those indigenous, they can have clay added or a clay product called bentonite to help them retain moisture. Bentonite is added to the soil at the rate of 1kg per sq meter and worked in down to 100mm in depth.

Basalt or volcanic soils are generally heavy clays. To grow plants other than those indigenous to the area, they can be mounded and/or gypsum added to improve drainage and texture.

Alluvial soils generally have high clay content and are found along drainage lines or across the Northern Plains – contour-rip them and/or mound to enhance growth; gypsum will also help.

Water

‘Nobody waters the bush’

Optimize water savings by planting in winter (July -August) on well drained, contour ripped sites. The winter rains will water your plants in and they will establish well during spring by naturally capturing sufficient rainfall. From experience, we have found that these plants survive without summer watering. Plantings in other seasons will require additional watering for plant establishment.

Areas subject to inundation should be planted in spring after the water has receded.

Mulch on top of your soil will also help retain soil moisture.

The salinity of water tolerated by plants depends on several factors, including species, provenance, stage of growth, soil type, but generally water over 800 EC can cause problems with leaf burning and make accumulate unless the soil is free draining. Sodium has an adverse effect on most clay soils in this region, damaging its structure and reducing permeability.

Grey water is typically 2 or 3 times as salty as the water entering the house, due to the high levels of salt in laundry detergents; these also contain phosphorous, at levels that can be toxic to some native species.

These constituents can accumulate in soils and the sodium has adverse effects on clay soils. In addition, grey water contains all the pathogens present in black water (sewage), albeit at much lower levels, which is why its use is governed by strict rules.

Indigenous plants are adapted to frost and drought, but natives from other areas may be frost tender, especially when small and may need protection.

Mulch



Several media are suitable for mulching native gardens.

- Sand – 5-10cm deep, fire safe, allows rainfall to rapidly penetrate to the soil, reflects light and warmth back through plant foliage, is free draining at the plant stem; sand does not freeze during a frost like organic mulches.
- Stone/gravel – 5-10cm deep, as above.
- ‘Eucy’ mulch – gives a more natural bush look.
- Pea straw – gradually breaks down, but do not incorporate into the soil.

Weeds

There are four main ways of controlling weeds before starting your garden.

- Hand weeding
- Scalping – for small areas use a rake hoe, or larger areas a bobcat
- Spraying – organic sprays are available
- Mulching – layers of newspaper under your mulch deters unwanted weeds from germinating.



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