

Soil - Smooth or Chunky?

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Smooth or Chunky? No, I'm not referring to my kids' peanut butter, but to the texture of my garden soil. My view of soil, Smooth or Chunky, has evolved over the years I have been gardening.

In the gardens of my youth, Chunky meant sandstone and shale rock pieces - chunks so hard you could not break them with a pick, let alone the tender root of a seedling. Smooth was what was left over when the chunks of rock were removed and pitched over the cliff! Smooth was fine textured, like silt. It was probably powdered sandstone. In those days, my mother was the gardener, and I was the observer. Organic methods were not widely publicized. She used peat moss and bloodmeal and multiple soil additives, adding organic matter (here I mean bulky material derived from plants, not necessarily toxic-free) year after year to improve the texture of her soil, in hopes to yield bounty in vegetables as well as flowering ornamentals. Additives, additives, additives.

In the garden of the first house I really and truly owned, Chunky meant the roots of those monster sized mature trees that someone had planted way too close together when the development was new. Chunky was what your shovel hit every time you tried to penetrate the soil with a shovel. Smooth was the top surface, where water hydroplaned right off the property into the street gutter. Not an inviting garden space, so container gardening became my forte. Potting soil - now that's Smooth. If you look at it closely it appears to be a bit textured, but for all intents and purposes it is definitely Smooth.

A visit to a conventional farm space was shocking. At 70MPH freeway driveby glance, farm soil appears to be Smooth, as far as the eye can see. Yet when one departs the driveby scene, and gets up close and personal, the plough has made huge knobby Chunks of the earth. The squash vines I saw were plenty happy amongst all of these clods. Why then, our city gardener's preoccupation with Smooth?

In my current garden space, Smooth and Chunky have run the gamut. Smooth described my garden soil when I first arrived - very sandy, a bit clayey, but not so much clay as to bind together. Chunky described our first batch of homemade compost, moist clods complete with whole avocado and peach pits, and intact eggshell halves. I never thought "chunky" was how compost should be; my husband and I were compost beginners. Smooth described the expensive bagged compost from the garden center, smooth and fine textured. A gentle breeze could disperse it off your open palm. Obviously, Smooth was the standard for "correct" compost. My Chunky homemade nonsense was clearly deficient!

I soon realized that a large part of my Chunky compost were balls, actual balls, of living worm bodies, all nestled together to devour a choice morsel. Garden center compost had none of these Chunks, instead sitting dry and uninhabited and sterile in its brightly colored bag, whose label attested to how "organic" it was. It now needs the label to persuade me of its value, after that observation!

I ventured into the world of mulching, beginning with found materials, like fallen leaves (chunky), and sawdust (combination smooth and chunky). Lo and behold, the powers that be in the

garden turned all of that to Smooth, a relatively fine-textured, moist, delicious, critter-rich dark soil, in the space of a year or two. Another foray into mulch involved the small bark chips sold in bags at the garden center. Definitely Chunky. I wondered if my soil would ever recover, or whether I would be digging lumps for all eternity.

Then came the "aha" moment, with the delivery of a massive free truckload of chipped tree trimmings for mulch. Now THAT's Chunky! Branch chips larger than my hand, among chipped leaves that lay dusty green and delicate. My father, still living at the sandstone and shale address described above, laughed at me and said I'd be picking chunks out of my garden for all eternity. Yet even as I continue to distribute Mulch Mountain into various beds around my property, I see the "forest floor" effect taking place. The visual appearance is one of beneath tall trees, where the natural leaf litter falls, and twigs are a normal part of the soil texture. Beyond visual, the vigor of those plants which have already received mulch, is already clear. The moisture retention appears to be quite good.

More than visual, there is this sense of "ahhhhhh..." about it. It smells right. Somehow the neatly raked and leaf-blower-swept Smooth soil surfaces of my neighbors are now looking stark, peaked and barren. Even though their soils are Smooth to my Definitely Chunky, there is a sense of earthiness to my garden. It just feels right. Isn't this the way nature intended it?

I don't think I will be picking out the Chunks anymore ...