



DIGGIN’ IT
BY PHAIDRA YUNKER
Ground work

If your garden has been struggling, it’s tempting to blame the weather, the seed packet or cosmic forces beyond your control. But before you point fingers, look down. The real story starts with the foundation: the soil.

Just like a house needs a solid base, plants need a stable, well-built foundation. Living soil is where plant health begins. When the foundation is strong, everything above it stands a better chance.

Soil isn’t a single living thing, but it behaves like a busy neighborhood. A teaspoon of healthy soil can hold more microbes than there are people on Earth. Soil is a community of living organisms working quietly to support your plants. These organisms interact with minerals, air and water to cycle nutrients, break down organic matter and create the structure roots depend on.

Dirt, by contrast, is what you sweep off your garage floor. It’s soil that’s lost its structure and biological life. Dirt can fill a hole, but it won’t grow a tomato. Soil is the furnished home; dirt is the empty apartment with peeling paint.

Improving soil requires steady, thoughtful habits. One of the simplest ways to strengthen your soil’s “household” is by adding organic matter. Compost, shredded leaves and wellaged manure all help improve texture, boost fertility and feed the organisms that keep the system running.

If you’re still tilling every spring, consider giving the soil a little peace and quiet. Tilling breaks up the natural structure that fungi and earthworms work so hard to build. Leaving soil undisturbed allows those underground residents to keep constructing the tunnels, channels and networks that help water move and roots grow.

Mulch is another reliable tool. A layer of straw, leaves or wood chips acts like insulation, keeping soil temperatures steady, conserving moisture and preventing erosion. Cover crops or low-growing groundcovers can do the same job during the off-season, protecting the soil’s surface from wind and weather. Ground cover crops like clover pull nitrogen from the air and store it in the soil, giving your garden a natural nutrient boost.

Before you rake every leaf into a towering pile destined for the landfill, consider what those leaves can do if you let them stay. Fallen leaves are a good thing. They provide winter shelter for pollinators and other beneficial insects. They also break down into organic matter, returning nutrients to the soil without you lifting more than a rake.

Letting leaves decompose naturally improves soil health, reduces the need for fertilizers and helps lawns retain moisture. The key is moderation. A thick, soggy layer can smother turfgrass, but mulching leaves with a mower creates a light, crumbly layer that breaks down beautifully. Think of it as free home improvement for your soil.

Every home has rules, and soil is no different. Soil pH (measured on a scale from 0 to 14) tells you how acidic or alkaline your soil is. Most garden plants prefer conditions close to neutral, but some, like blueberries and azaleas, insist on more acidic surroundings.

Even if your soil contains plenty of nutrients, the wrong pH can keep plants from accessing them. It’s like having a pantry full of food but a door that won’t open. Yellowing leaves, slow growth and general plant frustration often trace back to pH issues.

Changing soil pH, however, is not as simple as sprinkling a magic powder. Many soils (especially alkaline, high-pH soils typical in Washburn) are strongly buffered, meaning they resist change. Lowering pH takes time, patience and repeated applications of acidifying materials. Even then, rainfall, irrigation water and underlying minerals tend to nudge the soil back toward its original state.

For most gardeners, it’s more practical to work with the soil you have. Choose plants that naturally tolerate your soil’s chemistry, or grow acid-loving species in raised beds or containers filled with more suitable soil. Adding organic matter can also help plants access nutrients more effectively, even when the pH isn’t ideal.

Gardeners dealing with highpH soils still have options. Compost improves nutrient availability, elemental sulfur can make slow adjustments in small beds and using rainwater water can help sensitive plants. Chelated micronutrients like iron (remember “It ain’t easy being green”?) can also keep plants healthy when the soil’s natural “house rules” are hard to change.

While we’re talking about soil care, here’s a gentle truth: fertilizer can only do so much. It’s a quick patch job, like repainting a cracked wall without fixing what caused the crack. Plants may perk up for a while, but without healthy soil underneath, the improvement is temporary. Fertilizer feeds plants; organic matter feeds the soil, and that’s what creates lasting change. When the foundation is strong, you don’t need nearly as many shortterm fixes.

Healthy soil doesn’t develop overnight. It’s built gradually, through small, consistent habits that strengthen the foundation year after year. As you plan your next season, consider giving your soil a little extra care. When the foundation is strong, the whole garden stands tall.

Have plant questions? I’ve got answers. Email your questions or photos to digginit@nordaknorth.com, or stop by The Leader-News office with a photo or sample.

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BACK IN THE DAY
Underwood
COMPILED BY SHELLY WALLACE
from the Files of the Central McLean News Journal

20 years ago, Jan. 2006
“The Federal Government dropped the ball,” said local pharmacist Mark Malzer of Sodas and Things and owner of Turtle Lake Rexall Drug. That fact has both seniors and pharmacists losing sleep, as the Medicare Part D nightmare continues. Senior citizens visited about some of the headaches they have dealt with in paying the high cost of drugs and determining which drug plan would best suit their needs.

Could the present McLean County Jail be relocated? That’s just one option the McLean County Law Enforcement Center Assessment Committee discussed at its Jan. 10 meeting. The reason the existing jail should be moved would be to make room for a potential new facility on the same site.

It was a good year for McLean County, so says county auditor/treasurer, Les Korgel. Korgel presented the county commissioners with a narrative of the past year’s budget at their Jan. 10 commission meeting. One of the highlights showed that the county spent only 85 percent of its 2005 budget.

Thinking about developing property in Underwood? There could be answers to any questions you might have at a meeting to be held Jan. 24, at the Underwood City Hall. The Underwood Area Economic Development Committee is bringing in John Warren from Rural Development, Paul Recklin and Lynn Ekstrom from the Lewis and Clark Regional Council and Barb Owens from Affordable Financing.

Natalie Eslinger placed first in the Dramatic category of the Region VII Speech Tournament held at Turtle Lake Jan. 14.

The Underwood Comet girls notched a pair of wins on the hard court this past week, knocking off the visiting White Shield Warriors 66-33, then following up with a road win at Turtle Lake-Mercer, downing the Trojans 47-32.

The Comet boys struggled to put the ball through the hoop this past week, losing a pair of games on the hard court, 74-26, Friday at Turtle Lake, and 67-32 at Glen Ullin-Hebron Saturday.

30 years ago, Jan. 1996
The Underwood High School junior class is scrambling for bucks to pay for a prom but feel they may come up short. Stephanie Berg represented the class at the regular meeting of the school board last Thursday. “We are really hurting,” she told the board.

Part of the problem—concessions at football and basketball games used to help fund the prom. Some years ago, that was a junior class project. More recently, classes took turns providing concessions and split the profits. But finding students willing and able to work at the concession stand proved a problem. This year, the Comet Club took over operations of the concession stand. The class plans to

ask the club for a donation and asked the school board to consider matching the donation. The board will wait until the Comet Club considers the problem.

40 years ago, Jan. 1986
It was the thrill of victory for the Turtle Lake-Mercer Trojans and agony of defeat for the Underwood Comets when the final whistle blew at the McLean County B Squad Tourney. After trailing by six to eight points for most of the game, the Comets rallied in the final minutes to reach within one point of the Trojans.

Tom Repnow was named chairman of the McLean County Tourism Bureau when the group held an organizational meeting to discuss a plan of action for the upcoming tourist season. Darwin Saari was elected vice-chairman and Marlan Hvinden was appointed secretary.

Mrs. Ida Hoppe was hostess to a birthday party in honor of Mrs. Louise Schafer. Guests included Irene Hanson, Maude Leidholm, Bertha Koenig, Alvina and Jessie Pfaff.

55 years ago, Jan. 1971
Max and Mercer were the spoilers as far as the county tournament was concerned. Max won with a convincing 72-36 win over Mercer. Underwood and Turtle Lake, rated one and two at the start of the tourney, ended third and fourth.

Sunday, Feb. 7, is the date for the 67th Annual North Dakota State Picnic, to be held in Sycamore Grove Park, Los Angeles. All former North Dakota residents and winter visitors are welcome.

St. John’s Lutheran Church has undertaken some major improvement projects. Fluorescent lights were installed in the basement by Gordon Olson, Henry Westby and TeRoy Repnow. The church is also in the process of installing a complete set of pews purchased from St. Mark’s Lutheran Church of Minot. In order to fit, the pews are being cut down to 10 feet by various members of the congregations.

Mrs. D.H. Schuh is nursing a fractured wrist because of a fall on a slippery street here in Underwood.

65 years ago, Jan. 1961
Roger Smith and Larry Jesser enlisted in the U.S. Army Jan. 13. Roger is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Smith and Larry’s parents are Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Jesser. The boys will take their basic training at Fort Riley, Kansas.

L.G. Stewart caught an 18 3/4 lb. northern at Wolf Creek. This is his second 18-pounder in the past few weeks.

Rep. A.B. Burvee of Richland is drafting a bill to assess a citizen \$4 if he does not vote in a general election. He interprets the state constitution to mean it is a duty rather than a privilege to vote.

Donald Knudtson Implement was having a sale on electric ranges with prices ranging from \$139.95 to \$375.95 with trade.

Central McLean

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