

Creating Soil Blocks

Soil blocks are a homemade transplanting pot which eliminates transplant shock when used correctly. They are also very inexpensive. Soil block growing was done by the Aztecs for their floating gardens and by the Chinese. Modern soil block techniques were developed in Holland. Now there are many gadgets available to help you make your own blocks. These block makers vary in price from \$2.50 to \$15.00. Blocks can be made without such gadgets also.

Soil blocks present no barrier to the growth of the roots when planted in the garden. They dissolve completely into the garden soil and do not tend to wick water away from the transplant. The blocks are set in trays or flats for ease of handling. Roots do not tend to intertwine.

All materials used in making soil blocks should be screened through a ¼" screen. There are a number of possible mixes for making soil blocks from 100% peat moss (can create a problem of acidity and difficult to keep evenly moistened) to good garden soil and compost (may be a problem with damping off). One recommended mix is 4 parts peat moss to 1 part compost. If you are not sure of the quality of your compost, pasteurize the mix at 170° F for 20 minutes. Do not overheat or the structure of the mix will be damaged.

Wet the mix with hot water in a plastic tub or pail until it is the consistency of stiff cooked oatmeal. Mix the slurry very thoroughly. Let it sit overnight. If using a soil block maker thrust it into the mix 2 or 3 times to fill it tight. Push the blocks out into your tray or flat. Be sure the top of the flat is not higher than your blocks so that there is good air movement over the blocks. If one end of the flat is open or can be removed, it will be easier to remove the blocks. Dip the block maker in water between uses and clean well at the end of each day. The block maker will make a planting depression in the block.

If you do not want to use a block maker, pack the mixture into a flat, smooth it and use a thin lathe or heavy knife to create the blocks. There should be a 1/8"-1/4" air space between blocks. Blocks can be made to whatever size is convenient from ¾" to 3" squares. Use a pencil or chopstick to make the hole for the seed. Let the blocks sit a few hours before seeding. Water from the bottom to reduce disintegration. Blocks should be well-watered before setting them out in the garden and then watered in well. Be sure there is good contact between the garden soil and the block and pull the garden soil over the top of the block as well. This will help the plant absorb moisture in the garden and encourage it to extend its roots into the garden soil.