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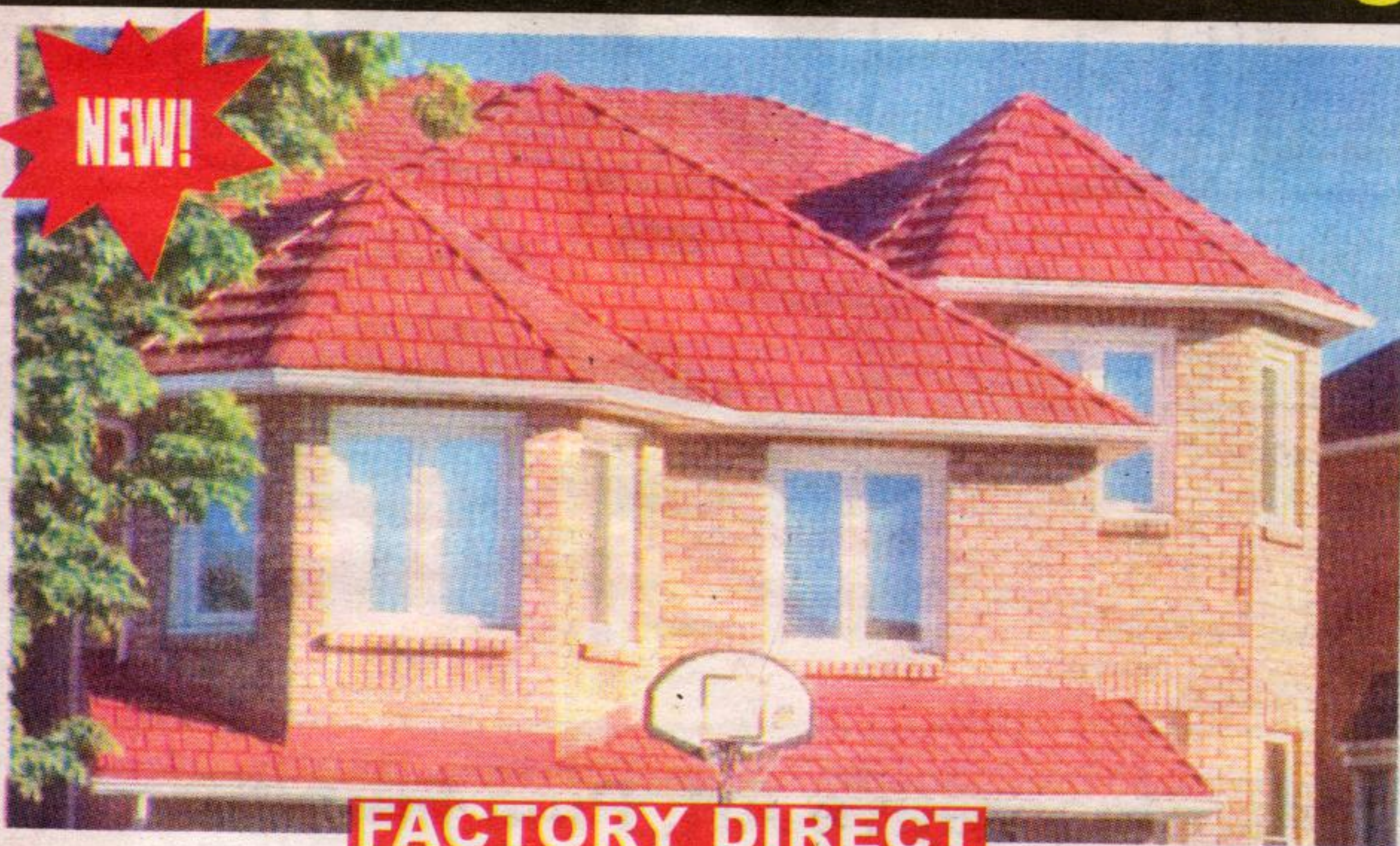


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## Giving You the Dirt

By SEAN JAMES, N.P.D.,  
PRESIDENT OF FERN RIDGE LANDSCAPING

### My Dirty Little Secret

In creating gardens, we usually use good earth – triple-mix topsoil and such. This is because everyone recognizes the benefits of starting right.

Good soil has three components: organic matter or compost has nutrients for plants, holds water, and helps resist compaction; clay holds and slowly releases nutrients; and sand or silt helps air and water infiltration and also helps roots divide so they can take up more water. A perfect soil has equal parts of all three. The soil we buy often has a decent balance. (Watch that there isn't a high percentage of wood chips.) Starting with a good compost-rich soil ensures plants will get the beginning they need.

Occasionally, folks want the soil in a bed removed and new soil added. The concern is that the soil has gone bad. Generally speaking, soil doesn't "go bad" or at least, nothing is wrong that can't be fixed.

The bit no one tells you regarding soil is that is that organic matter breaks down over time. The more broken down it is when you put it in your garden, the faster it's gone. This is why "Black Loam" is sort of a waste of money. It's gone, broken down almost completely by the following Spring. Granted it looks good, and if that is your goal, so be it, but don't count on it to improve soil structure or last more than a season.

In an established garden, a better way to go is to add compost such as leaf mold, well broken-down compost from a local farmer or mushroom compost every Spring. In Milton's Town Hall Gardens, every Fall the Horticulture Society gets 40 bags of leaves from the Town, mulches them up with lawn mowers and squirts them into the beds. By the end of May it's broken down and worked into the soil by Mother Nature herself, cleverly

disguised as thousands of worms and billions of microbes. That soil used to be terrible but is now some of the best I've ever seen. It seems like a bit of work but is probably the best thing you can do for your garden and great for the environment.

Wood mulch does not add an appreciable amount of organic matter to the soil. If anything, the organic matter in the soil is breaking down faster than the wood can replenish it. Wood mulch stops you from adding organic matter to the soil. Who would want to cover up that lovely, expensive mulch with ugly old compost? Stop thinking of compost as ugly or, as is often the case, as (insert dirty word

here). If you want to mulch the garden, use a material which will enrich the soil such as Cocoa Mulch or Composted Pine Mulch. Cocoa mulch contains more nutrients than compost, breaks down within a year enriching the soil and represses weed growth. Yes, you do have to put it on every spring but your soil and plants will get better and better every year. You won't have to fertilize your gardens and watering will have more effect. You'll have fewer weeds and those which do make it through will be easier to pull out.

I believe in minimizing chemical use, not in banning it. Keep in mind though, regarding soil, the more chemicals and fertilizers you use, the harder it is on the essential soil microbes which help break down organic matter and release nutrients to the plants. Adding compost will, over time, reduce the amount of synthetics you need to use on your lawn and garden.

Also regarding soil, now is a great time to aerate your turf. Aeration reduces compaction, helps with water infiltration and allows the turf to grow more strongly, thereby resisting insects and fungi better.



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