



IOWA CHAPTER

Ask Before Buying a Home: How much topsoil is on the lot? You can say “no, thanks” to buying a property that has no topsoil.

Before you purchase a home, check for how much topsoil is on the lot. Nothing is more disappointing to a home owner than realizing that the builder did not return the topsoil to the lot before the sod was laid. Without topsoil, nothing seems to grow. Grass, flowers and trees struggle to establish roots where there is no topsoil. Fertilizer does not help. Water does not soak into the soil.

Topsoil is a necessary component for a healthy lawn. Topsoil holds water and fertilizer on the lot. Without topsoil, trees, lawns and gardens plants will not thrive. Unfortunately, some builders have been known to cut corners by not returning topsoil to the lot after construction of the home. The builders then lay sod on compacted clay. The yard may look great after the sod is laid, but problems quickly begin.

What’s more, trying to repair the situation is a costly ordeal – in money, time and labor -- ripping up sod, bringing truckloads of topsoil to the property, hiring or renting equipment to spread the topsoil on the lot and restoring sod. It is much cheaper to put the topsoil back during construction. What’s more, for brand new construction, the cost of that work can be easily included in the purchase price of the home and in the homeowner’s loan.

Alternatively an inch of compost can be placed over the yard every year for several years. Over time, the compost will improve water retention in the yard and will support healthy grass. Obviously this requires time and patience. All the while, the costs for extra fertilizer and additional watering will continue until enough topsoil has been added to support a healthy lawn. Further frustrations mount as trees and garden plants die.

In addition to promoting a healthy yard, topsoil holds stormwater on the land, allowing it to slowly move into streams, rivers and lakes. Without topsoil, the water will rush off the land, carrying fertilizer along with it. Once the stormwater enters a river, stream or lake, it provides the right conditions to promote algae and bacteria growth. That leads to poor water quality and water that smells bad.



Photo by Lynn Betts, USDA NRCS

The best solution is to check on the depth of the topsoil before you purchase a home, even one that has been recently constructed. And if there is little topsoil, you can pass on purchasing the property.

**If the builder cut corners by not returning the topsoil to a lot,
you don’t have to buy the property. In doing so, you will protect yourself,
protect your property and protect water quality.**