



HOME & GARDEN

Home and Garden information center • 12005 Homewood Road • Ellicott City, MD 21042 • 1-800-342-2507

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Soil, Fertilizer, Mulch and Compost Tips

Soil Improvement

- Poor, compacted soils can be improved through the generous addition of organic matter. This spring, spade or till in a 2-4 inch layer of leaf compost or well-rotted manure. If you want to grow vegetables, flowers or herbs this year and your soil is especially poor, consider building a raised bed and filling it with a purchased mixture of topsoil and leaf compost.
- Avoid the temptation to turn over or dig into wet soil. This can cause long-term damage to the structure of your soil. Squeeze a handful of soil and bounce it up and down in your hand. If it breaks apart easily you can dig it; if it holds together it's too wet to dig.
- Earthworms are a sign of healthy soil. Adding organic matter will improve soil structure and attract earthworms. Contrary to popular belief, heavy rains don't drown earthworms (they have no lungs). They come to the surface during wet periods to mate more freely. They die because they dry out, are parasitized by insects, or contract diseases. Soil insecticides will also kill them and drive them out of the soil.

Fertilizer

- Fertilize plants according to their specific needs based on soil test recommendations. Trees are typically fertilized after they drop their leaves in the fall, not in the spring. Mature shade trees do not typically need to be fertilized.
- Avoid the temptation to fertilize ornamental garden plants that appear to be healthy and productive. Over-fertilization, especially with those high in nitrogen, can lead to overly succulent, weak growth and encourage sucking insect pests like scales, aphids and adelgids.
- It is not a good idea to apply fertilizer to cool season turf in the spring unless your turf is weak and thin or if you did not fertilize this past fall. When selecting a lawn fertilizer choose those containing a minimum of 40% water insoluble nitrogen. Fertilizing in the spring encourages rapid succulent growth that is more susceptible to attack by insects and disease.
- Fertilize spring flowering bulbs now while the foliage is green with a balanced fertilizer like 5-10-5, 10-6-4 or 10-10-10. This can be very helpful for young or weak bulbs. Fertilizing now will strengthen the bulb for best bloom next year.
- Rhododendrons and azaleas can be fertilized with a balanced fertilizer after the bloom period.
- Soluble fertilizers can be applied to the foliage or root-zone of spring crops to get them off to a fast start. Whenever applying fertilizer granules always sweep it off of driveways and sidewalks. Otherwise the fertilizer will wash into the storm sewers and eventually into the streams and rivers.

Mulch

- Mulches should be applied only 1-2 inches deep around ornamental plants and kept away from shrub and tree trunks. Mature trees do not benefit from being mulched except to keep riding lawn mowers from damaging the trunks.

Educating People To Help Themselves

Local Governments - U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating

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Compost

- As the weather continues to get warmer the composting process will accelerate.
- This is a good time to turn compost piles, remove any large woody materials, and add a nitrogen source to accelerate the breakdown process
- When making a compost pile, make it at least one cubic yard in volume to heat up properly. An even mixture of green, high nitrogen and brown, high carbon materials is necessary for rapid composting. Grass clippings and spent plants from the flower and vegetable garden provide a good source of high nitrogen, green materials for the compost pile. Fallen leaves and old straw mulch are good sources of high carbon, brown materials. To accelerate the compost process shred your materials with a lawnmower, string trimmer or machete. Keep sticks, roots and woody stems out of your compost pile. They take too long to breakdown and make it difficult to turn the ingredients.
- Finished compost is the very best “starter material” for a compost pile because it contains nitrogen and a huge number of microbes. It is not necessary to add soil or lime to a compost pile. Consider placing a tarp or lid over your pile to prevent water logging during wet periods, conserve moisture during dry periods, and prevent nutrient leaching. Kitchen scraps thrown on top of compost piles may attract pest animals. It is best to bury these scraps in the middle of your compost pile or in garden soil.

Have a pest or gardening question?

Call the Home and Garden Information Center

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