



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

Fertilizer

- Do not fertilize shade trees, fruit trees or shrubs at this time. It might promote new growth at a time when perennial plants are beginning to enter dormancy and could result in winter damage. Trees are typically fertilized after they drop their leaves in the fall. Mature shade trees do not need to be fertilized every year. Bluegrass and fescue turf is also fertilized in the fall.
- Avoid the temptation to fertilize ornamental garden plants that appear to be healthy and productive. Over-fertilization, especially with fertilizers that are high in nitrogen, can lead to overly succulent, weak growth and encourage sucking insect pests like scales, aphids and adelgids.
- Help protect the Bay by using fertilizers wisely. Fertilizers and lime should be applied in accordance with soil test recommendations. Overuse of nitrogen fertilizers may contribute to groundwater pollution. Avoid getting fertilizer on sidewalks and driveways where it may wash into storm drains, streams and eventually into the Bay.

Mulch

- Various mushrooms and slime molds, like “dog-vomit” fungi and stinkhorn fungi, may be observed now growing in mulch. These are unsightly but harmless. In addition to slime molds, toadstools and other mushrooms may emerge around root systems and from mulched beds. They are harmless to plants, if you don’t like them they can be simply knocked over.
- Don’t lay down mulches containing large wood chips around your home. These may attract termites. Hardwood or pine mulches that are predominantly bark are recommended. Avoid the excessive use of hardwood mulches around acid-loving plants like azalea and blueberry. Hardwood mulches can contribute to manganese toxicity problems in these plants.

Compost

- If your compost pile is overly wet and smelly, tear it apart and mix in some dry materials high in carbon, like shredded newspaper, straw or shredded leaves. Be sure to bury kitchen scraps deep inside your outdoor compost pile. Exclude animal fats and oil.
- Contrary to popular belief, it is not helpful to layer different ingredients when building a pile. Mixing together materials of different textures will promote faster decay.
- Many kinds of interesting invertebrates live in a compost pile including manure worms, centipedes, millipedes, pill bugs, and pseudoscorpions. They are part of the composting ecosystem and should be appreciated, not feared. Do not attempt to spray or otherwise kill these beneficial critters.
- Compost piles should be at least one cubic yard in volume to heat up properly. It is not necessary to buy a bioactivator to add to the compost pile. Finished compost is the very best starter material for a compost pile because it contains nitrogen and a huge number of microbes. It is also not necessary to add soil or lime to a compost pile. Consider placing a tarp or lid over your pile to prevent waterlogging and nutrient leaching. Be sure to bury kitchen scraps deep inside your outdoor compost pile.

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