



HOME & GARDEN

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Soil, Fertilizer, Mulch, and Compost Tips - November 2008

Soil

- Now is a good time to have your soil tested.
- Bare soil, especially on slopes is prone to erosion and should be covered with mulch, groundcovers or turf.
- Avoid the temptation to turn over or dig into wet soil. This can cause long-term damage to the structure of your soil. To test if your soil is workable take a fist full and squeeze it, if it stays in a tight clump it is still too wet to be worked. If it breaks apart it is dry enough to be cultivated. Poor, compacted soils can be improved through the generous addition of organic matter. Spade or till in a 6-8 inch layer of leaf compost or well-rotted manure.
- If you want to grow vegetables, flowers or herbs next spring and your soil is especially poor, consider building a raised bed and fill it with a purchased mixture of topsoil and leaf compost.

Fertilizer

- Do not attempt to melt ice with granular garden fertilizers. They are very corrosive to concrete and metal, can burn plants and contribute to waterway pollution. Use sand to improve traction on walkways and magnesium chloride products to melt ice. Keep leftover bags of fertilizer wrapped up securely in heavy plastic bags or solid containers. Moisture in the air and ground will be absorbed by loose granular fertilizer resulting in a very messy pile of wet fertilizer granules.

Mulch

- Mulch should be applied only 2-3 inches deep around ornamental plants and kept away from shrub and tree trunks. Deep mulch makes a favorable mulch for voles. If the mulch is next to woody plant trunks, the voles will feed on and damage bark and wood. Mature trees do not benefit from being mulched.
- Mulch perennial beds, trees and shrubs with fallen leaves to help protect crowns and shallow root systems from severe cold weather.

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Compost

- The composting process will slow down considerably when temperatures dip below 50°F. Turning the pile every 2 weeks will hasten the breakdown process. 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. Shred your materials with a lawnmower, string trimmer or machete to speed-up the breakdown process.
- 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 over the fall and winter. 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.
- Redworms will not survive the winter outdoors and are of no benefit in the compost bin. Redworm bins can be set-up in your kitchen or basement over the winter. Read our fact sheet for more information.

Have a pest or gardening question?

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