



# 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

- Bare soil 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. 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 this fall and filling it with a purchased mixture of topsoil and leaf compost.

### Fertilizer

- Keep leftover bags of fertilizer wrapped up securely in heavy plastic bags or solid containers. Rodents will often chew holes in fertilizer bags looking for food.
- 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. To prevent nutrient pollution of groundwater and the Chesapeake Bay keep fertilizers off hard surfaces like driveways and sidewalks. Be cautious when fertilizing areas of your yard that border these hard surfaces.

### Mulch

- Mulches should be applied only 2-3 inches deep around ornamental plants and kept away from shrub and tree trunks. 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.
- 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

- This is a good time to start a compost pile by mixing together spent plants, kitchen scraps, fallen leaves, old mulch and grass clippings. Shred your materials with a lawnmower, string trimmer or machete to speed-up the breakdown process. Keep twigs, branches and other woody materials out of the pile.
- Barrel and tumbler type composters work well in small spaces but need to be closely monitored to insure a proper mix of green and brown materials and adequate moisture levels. A disadvantage of barrels is that they are too small to heat up quickly. 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.
- An even mixture of green, high nitrogen and brown, high carbon materials is necessary for rapid composting. Grass clippings and

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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.

- When you have a particularly serious insect or disease problem in your garden, do not compost the affected plants.
- Here are some ideas for dealing with fallen tree leaves:
  - o Shred them with a mulching lawnmower and leave them in place
  - o Shred them and add them to your compost pile
  - o Cover your garden soil with shredded leaves
  - o Mulch perennials, trees and shrubs with shredded leaves

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