



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

- Now is a good time to have your soil tested if you have not had your lawn or garden soil tested for the past 3-4 years. It is also a good time to apply lime and organic matter to the soil surface where it is required. Don't incorporate these materials until the soil is dry enough to work. 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.
- Avoid the temptation to turn over or dig into wet soil. Tilling wet soil can cause it to become cloddy and brick hard when it dries out. How do you know when your soil can be turned or tilled? One test is to form a clump of your soil into a ball. Bounce it up and down in your hand a few times. If it breaks apart easily it's probably OK to work.
- If you want to grow vegetables, flowers or herbs this spring and your soil is especially poor, consider building a raised bed and filling it with a purchased mixture of topsoil and leaf compost.

Fertilizer

- It's important not to over use fertilizers, although plant growth can be enhanced with additional fertilization, too often it is overdone. This results in excessive nutrient runoff and over-fertilization with fertilizers, especially those high in nitrogen, can lead to overly-succulent, weak growth and encourage sucking insect pests like scales, aphids and adelgids. Most landscape plants get adequate nutrition from a healthy soil rich with organic matter.
- If broadcasting granular fertilizers, sweep them from paved surfaces where they can easily wash into storm drains and waterways.
- Plants that typically benefit the most are those that are producing either flowers or fruits such as flowering annuals and vegetables. Apply a soluble fertilizer to the root system and or foliage to encourage quick establishment. Compost tea, fish emulsion, seaweed extracts, and soluble plant foods can all be used. Additional fertilizers are often unnecessary if well-managed beds are receiving yearly applications of a least one inch of compost.

Mulch

- New bags of mulch have arrived at local garden centers. You can choose from hardwood or pine bark mulch. Both types work well, although the pine bark tends to provide a more acidic reaction to the soil which is ideal for acid-loving plants. . Mulches should be applied only 2-3 inches deep around ornamental plants and kept away from direct contact with shrub and tree trunks. Mature trees do not benefit much from being mulched except to provide a protective barrier around their trunks from riding lawn mower damage.

Compost

- Your compost pile will begin to come back to life this month. When your pile dries out a bit, try to mix or turn the remaining ingredients to hasten decomposition. If your pile is overly wet and smelly, 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 to prevent offensive odors that might also attract rodents.
- Compost piles should be at least one cubic yard in volume to heat up properly (3ft. x 3ft x 3ft.) 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 unnecessary to add soil or lime to a compost pile. Consider placing a tarp or lid over your pile to prevent water logging and nutrient leaching.

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