



HOME AND GARDEN INFORMATION CENTER

University of Maryland Extension

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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. Fall is an ideal time to add organic matter to your garden. Spade or till in a 6-8 inch layer of leaf compost or well-rotted manure.

Fertilizer

- Keep leftover bags of fertilizer wrapped up securely in heavy plastic bags or solid containers. Rodents will often chew holes in fertilizer bags stored in sheds and garages.
- Help protect the Bay by using fertilizers wisely. Fertilizers and lime should be applied in accordance with soil test recommendations. Overuse of 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. Read HG 110, "Selecting and Using a Soil Testing Laboratory" for more information on using fertilizers.

Mulch

- Mulch 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, except to keep lawn mowers away from tree trunks..
- Mulch perennial beds, trees and shrubs with fallen leaves to help protect crowns and shallow root systems from severe cold weather.

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. 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.

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- 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.

**Do you have a plant or insect pest question?
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