UNH Cooperative Extension Question of the Week

Q. What are soil amendments?

A. A soil amendment is any material that you add to the soil to improve its physical properties. Soil amendments can increase water retention, improve permeability, infiltration, and drainage, increase aeration, and ultimately improve soil structure. Amendments are used to build a better environment for root growth which generally leads to more top growth. One of the best ways to improve plant growth is to regularly incorporate organic matter. Organic amendments do all of the above as well as increase the amount of nutrients in the soil and the plant’s ability to hold those nutrients. Organic matter is also an important source for the work done by bacteria, fungi, and earthworms.

In New Hampshire most of our soils have an organic matter content of about 3%. Most plants grow better with an organic matter content of about 5%. At 5% the release of nitrogen from organic matter is adequate for most plants without additional fertilizers. However, organic matter needs to be added on a regular basis to maintain this level.

Just like bottled water, there are no regulations for labelling on composts or manures. The label doesn’t have to tell you what’s inside, what it should be used for, or the nutrient content of the ingredients. That means that you, the consumer, have to make decisions based on incomplete information. If you are considering buying a product read the front label carefully: it will often tell you the intended use, and whether or not fertilizer or moisture-holding components have been added. If you flip the bag over, sometimes the ingredients and percentages of nutrients are listed. Like a food label, they are usually listed in the order of most to least. Studying the information carefully should help you purchase the product that most closely meets your goal while providing the best value for your money.

Got questions? UNH Cooperative Extension Education Center’s Info Line offers practical help finding answers for your lawn and garden questions. Call toll free at 1-877-398-4769, M-F, 9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m., or e-mail us at answers@unh.edu