



Using Your Compost

Using finished compost is a way of returning organic matter to the soil in a usable form. Soil organic matter benefits plant growth by improving the moisture and nutrient-holding capacity of sandy soils, by helping aerate and loosen heavy clay soils, by adding essential plant nutrients in to the soil and by helping prevent soil erosion.

Think of compost primarily as a soil conditioner rather than a fertilizer. Although it has some value as an organic fertilizer, some nutrients essential for plant growth, such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium, may be present in such small amounts that additional fertilizers will be necessary for adequate plant growth. A soil test will determine if compost-amended garden soil requires additional fertilizing.

Ways To Use Your Compost

Soil Amendment: The best time to apply compost into a flower or vegetable bed is when preparing the bed for planting. Spread a layer of compost up to three inches thick on the soil surface and spade or rototill it into the upper 6 inches of soil. This will improve the soil texture, help retain moisture, and assist plants in absorbing soil nutrients.

Potting Mix: Mix one part compost, one part coarse sand, perlite or vermiculite, and two parts topsoil and use to pot indoor or outdoor plants. Because seed-starting mixes should be sterile to avoid the danger of disease, it is not advisable to use compost for germinating seed.

Mulch: Mulches help retain moisture, keep down weeds, reduce soil temperature fluctuation and prevent soil compaction. Spread two to six inches of compost around the base of your flower and vegetable plants, shrubs, and trees. As the mulch decomposes it will improve the soil around your plants.

Lawn Top-Dressing: Sift compost through one-half inch mesh hardware cloth and apply in a thin layer so that grass plants are not completely covered. Compost can also be worked into bare spots prior to reseeding.

Exciting recent research from the United States, Germany, Japan and Israel has demonstrated that both compost and watery extracts of compost (“compost teas”) help protect crops against a wide range of common plant diseases, ranging from late blight on potatoes and tomatoes, to powdery mildew, apple scab and fusarium wilt.

Researchers believe that bacteria, fungi and other components of compost inhibit plant disease by a wide variety of mechanisms, including boosting plants’ resistance to infection, inhibiting spore germination, and antagonism and competition with pathogens.

Because most research on the disease-suppressive action of composts has been conducted on commercial farms under controlled conditions, Cooperative Extension is not yet able to make specific recommendations to home gardeners on using compost to control plant diseases.

However, we do suggest that you keep making compost from a wide range of available ingredients: kitchen and yard wastes, weeds, fall leaves and animal manures, and incorporating the finished product into planting beds, mulches or sidedressings.

If you want to experiment with compost tea, mix one part finished compost (*never use raw manure*) with five parts water and let the mixture steep outdoors for at least three days. Then strain the tea through muslin or cheesecloth and spray onto crop foliage with clean standard spraying equipment.

*original fact sheet written by Margaret Hagen, UNH Extension Educator, Agricultural Resources, revised, 9/00,
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