

Organic Soil Amendments

Improving a poor garden often begins with improving the soil. Adding organic (natural) materials to clay soil (which is what we have in the Washington area) improves drainage and aeration, and helps the soil dry out and warm up more quickly in the spring. Organic material also increases the number of soil organisms. Over time, a well-amended soil will supply more of the nutrients your plants require, thereby reducing fertilizer requirements. It also allows deeper water penetration and retains moisture.

Good organic amendments (additions) for garden soils include your own compost, wood by-products such as sawdust and bark mulch, peat moss, well-rotted manure, leaf mold, grass, pine fines, and compost. Inorganic amendments include pumice, perlite, vermiculite, and sand. Pre-mixed products, such as Bumper Crop, contain a balanced mix of several organic materials. Although the amendments will add nutrients and improve the texture of your soil, it still may be lacking in specific micronutrients. A soil test is beneficial to address what your soil may need.

Bumper Crop: A balanced mix of sphagnum peat moss, composted barnyard manure, composted shellfish, aged bark, mycorrhizal inoculants, poultry manure, and is pH adjusted. It was developed as an all purpose amendment that breaks down heavy clay soil, and adds nutrients and porosity to your soil.

Manure: Composted manure is well known for the benefits it brings to your soil. It is easy to work into the soil and can be used in fairly large quantities as a soil amendment. It is also very high in nitrogen and may affect the pH of your soil.

Peat Moss: A naturally occurring lightweight moss that acts as a sponge in the soil, improving the soil's ability to retain moisture. In an area where there is a drainage problem, although peat will improve the texture of the soil, it may also make the water problem worse. It has few nutrients and will acidify the soil, so check your pH.

Leaf Mold: A mixture of leaves and grass clippings from Montgomery and Prince George's County, sold under the name of **LeafGro**. A good source of humus for soil improvement; it slowly releases nitrogen and potassium into the soil.

Wood Products: Sawdust or ground wood chips are helpful to improve the drainage and texture of soil. Rotting shredded hardwood mulch should be mixed into the soil before adding new mulch. This will add more nutrients to the soil and prevent a thick crust of mulch from being created.

The best time to amend a soil is in the fall so that the materials will have time to break down. The next best time is in spring, two or three weeks before you start planting. Add a layer about 4 inches thick and work into the soil about 6-12 inches deep. Don't apply when the soil is wet - wait until it dries out a bit.

Over the course of time, the organic amendments you have added will continue to break down and build a high quality organic soil, providing a slow-release of nutrients needed for your plants.

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