

NURTURING YOUR SOIL - Part 2

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Now that we know a bit about soil structure and the organisms that inhabit it, we can take a look at how to feed our soil and its residents to produce the rich, loamy humus that we gardeners prize so highly. There are several ways one can enrich their soil including composts, mulches, fertilizers and cover crops.

Compost is the product created by the breakdown of organic waste by microbes, insects, worms, etc. It's a wonderful way to recycle yard and kitchen wastes which, in turn, reduce the amount of waste in landfills. There are several methods of composting some of which include hot (fast), cold (slow) and earthworm composting (vermicompost). Compost is to soil what food is to your body. When compost is tilled into the soil, it allows for easier digging and improved water/nutrient flow.

Mulch is any material placed onto the surface of the soil to improve water retention and moderate temperatures. Mulches can also be applied to inhibit weed growth. Some natural mediums used as mulch are wood chips, bark chips, shredded leaves and straw. Plastic sheeting can also be used as mulch. It will act like a blanket, holding in moisture and warmth.

Fertilizers are either a natural or synthetic product that is sprayed onto the plant or added to the soil to apply nutrients. They are a supplement to a soil's native nutrient supply. Quick growing crops such as vegetables need more nutrients than a slower growing plant like a perennial. It's important to follow exact instructions for any type of fertilizer and use only what you need. Remember that any excess nutrients the plant doesn't use could end up in the water shed by running off into surface water or leach into groundwater.

A cover crop (green manure) is a crop planted with the intent for it to be dug back into the soil. The reason for tilling the cover crop into the soil is to return organic matter and nitrogen to it. Legumes, (peas, clover, vetch) are common cover crops.

With so many ways to enrich soil, your garden can't help but grow!

Source: *Sustainable Gardening: The Oregon/Washington Master Gardener Handbook*, Washington State University, 2006.