

Organic Matter, Mulch, Peat Moss

As homeowners are becoming more concerned with environmental issues, they are wanting to use better methods to care for their gardens. Whether the gardens are vegetable, flower, perennial or shrubs, most homeowners are perplexed by which product they should be using. The question frequently becomes "Should I add organic matter, compost, manure, peat moss, mulch or wood chips?".

Compost, manure, peat moss, and bark chips are all types of organic matter that can be added to soils. They are all vegetation which are in different stages of decomposition. However organic matter is frequently interchanged with compost.

Mulch is simply a layer of material that is placed on top of the soil. It can be made from organic matter but can also be a layer of almost anything including undecayed vegetation like leaves, straw, or pinecones, but also can be sand, gravel, or stone.

Compost is formed by allowing decaying vegetation such as leaves, grass clippings, small branches, table scraps, etc. to decompose. Through the composting procedure this vegetation will break down so that it almost looks like soil but it has a lot of small pieces that look much like small twigs and chewed up leaves. When you pick it up the compost does not stick together. It is dark brown in colour and has an earthy smell.

At this stage of decomposition, the compost is excellent for any type of soil. It is rich in nutrients which are gradually released in a form your plants can use. Compost also breaks up clay soil making it loose and porous yet it can also retain moisture. This allows water and air to move more freely in the soil, so roots can easily obtain the air, water, and nutrients the plants need. A healthy plant in good soil is more resistant to disease, insects, and drought. Compost works best mixed into the existing soil rather than spread in a layer on top of the soil.

Fresh animal manure needs time to decompose before it can be used. It contains a lot of bacteria including E-coli. It also contains a high amount of nitrogen that would burn live plants. The high temperatures produced during the composting process kills the bacteria including the E-coli. Composted manure is a good source of nutrients for plants. Manure purchased in bags from nurseries or garden centres is ready to be applied. Manure can be added to the soil at any time. It can be spread in a layer on top of the soil but is better mixed into the soil.

Peat moss is decayed vegetation that has been composted for a

longer period of time. It contains very little nutrients. It does assist in breaking down clay soil and retaining moisture. Most importantly, it absorbs nutrients and moisture from the soil and passes it directly to the plants through its cation exchange properties. Peat moss can be applied at any time, but preferably before planting. It can be spread in a layer on top of the soil, but is much better worked into the soil.

Wood chip mulch is made of the branches of trees and shrubs which are put through a shredder. They are just beginning to decay and break down. This type of mulch should not be mixed into the soil for a few years as it will absorb moisture and nutrients from the soil until it reaches the stage where it will release nutrients.

Put in a layer on top of the soil will help the soil retain moisture and help prevent the growth of weeds. This mulch can also be quite decorative in your landscape.