

Gardening with Organic Matter

More homeowners are discovering the pleasures of growing their own vegetables. They are also realizing the advantages of adding organic matter to the soil in their garden.

This organic matter is made up of a combination of leaves, grass clippings, table scraps (excluding meat), twigs, dead plants, etc. When these products break down, they form a compost which looks like a very loose dark brown soil.

A 1" (2.5 cm) layer of compost spread over the soil when mixed or rototilled into the soil should provide good results.

This compost when added to the garden serves many functions.

- since it is very rich in nutrients and the nutrients are released slowly, the plants are being constantly fed
- prevents "fertilizer burn" since only small amounts of nutrients are released at once
- helps to retain moisture in sandy soils
- breaks up clay soils so the soil is more friable
- prevents erosion by allowing excess water to percolate down through the soil
- easy to work into the soil
- can be applied at any time, but is better applied before garden is planted

Mulch is very similar to compost but it is usually composed of chips of wood or shredded bark which have not decomposed. It may have turned brown but the pieces of wood or bark are very visible and do not break apart if squeezed.

This mulch is frequently applied on top of the soil in a layer 2-3" (50-75 cm) deep.

It also serves many purposes.

- prevents weeds from growing in the bed
- prevents water and mud from splashing up on plants
- keeps the soil cooler

- prevents the soil from drying out too quickly
- reduces the effect of wind and water erosion
- will eventually decay and provide nutrients and other benefits to the soil
- adds a decorative touch to the garden

Peat moss is made of organic matter and is found in bogs. It can be spread in a 1" (2.5 cm) layer and either mixed into the soil or left on top of the soil to be gradually mixed in as you are working the soil around the plant.

Its main uses include

- helps break down clay soil
- holds moisture in sandy soils
- helps the plant to easily absorb water, nutrients and air through the roots

Organic matter, mulch and peat moss are frequently called soil amendments. The addition of any one of these can result in a healthier, stronger plant. A healthier plant is more resistant to disease and insect damage.