



Cooperative Extension Tompkins County

Compost Education
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Compost Uses

Compost is a valuable resource for soil improvement. Compost is useful to the home gardener, in the restoration of landscapes where topsoil has been removed or compacted, and to restore agricultural and forest lands.

Compost is typically applied in three ways:

- To mulch or “top dress” planted areas**
- To amend soil prior to planting**
- As a component in potting mixes**

Mulch: Compost can be used to mulch annual and perennial plantings, shrubs and trees and as a top dressing for lawns. Recommended uses of compost as mulch and top dressing are show below:

Using Compost as Mulch

On flower and vegetable beds:

Remove weeds and grass that may grow through mulch.

Screen or pick through compost to remove large, woody materials. They may be unattractive, and will compete for nitrogen if mixed into the soil.

Apply 1”-3” of compost over the entire bed, or place in rings around each plant that extend as far as its outermost leaves.

Always keep mulches a few inches away from the base of the plant to prevent damage by pests and disease.

On lawns:

Use screened commercial compost, or sift homemade compost through a ½” or finer mesh.

Spread compost in ¼”- ½” layers after thatching, coring, or reseeding.

On trees and shrubs:

Remove sod from around trees and shrubs as far as branches spread. If this is impractical, remove sod from within a minimum of 4’ diameter circle around plants.

Use coarse compost or materials left after sifting. Remove only the largest branches and rocks.

Spread 1”-3” of compost.

For erosion control:

Spread coarse compost, or materials left after sifting, in layers 2”-4” deep over entire planting area or in rings extending to the drip line.

Mulch exposed slopes or erosion-prone areas with 2”-4” of coarse compost.

Soil Amendment: Compost can be used to enrich garden beds before planting annuals, ground covers, shrubs and trees. Recommended applications for different plants are shown on the next page. Amend soils by mixing compost thoroughly into the top 6”-12” of existing soil. *Do not lay compost on top of the existing soil without mixing:* the interface where they meet can become a barrier to penetration by roots and water.

Using Compost as a Soil Amendment

In flower and vegetable beds and ground covers:

Dig or till base soil to an 8"-10" depth.

Mix 1"-4" of compost through the entire depth. In established gardens, mix 1"-3" of compost into the top 6"-10" of soil each year before planting.

On lawns:

Till base soil to a 6"-12" depth.

Mix 1"-2" of finely textured compost into the loosened base soil.

Around trees and shrubs:

Dig or till base soil to minimum 8"-10" depth throughout planting area, or an area 2-5 times the width of the root ball of individual specimens.

Mix 1"-4" of compost through the entire depth.

Do not use compost at the bottom of individual planting holes or to fill the holes. Mulch the surface with wood chips or coarse compost.

Potting Soil and Seed Starting Mixes: Sifted compost can be used as part of a potting soil for use in planters, house plants, or starting seedlings in flats. Compost is a good component in potting soil: it stores moisture and supplies not found in sand, bark, peat and pumice.

Use only very mature compost to avoid "burning" plants or tying up nitrogen in the soil. Water new plants until water runs out of the bottom of container to wash out any harmful salts.

Use compost to make up no more than 1/3 of the volume of a potting mix. Some simple "recipes" for making compost mixes are shown below. Or use compost to enrich purchased potting mixes.

Using Compost in Potting Mixes

For starting and growing seedlings in flats or small containers:

Sift compost through a 1/2" mesh.

Mix 1 part sifted compost, 1 part coarse sand, and 1 part Sphagnum peat moss. Add 1/2 cup of lime for each bushel (8 gal.) of mix. Use liquid fertilizers when true leaves emerge.

For growing transplants and plants in larger containers:

Sift compost through a 1" mesh or remove larger particles by hand.

Mix 1 part compost; 1 part ground-up bark, Perlite or pumice; 1 part coarse sand; and 1 part loamy soil or peat moss. Add 1/2 cup of lime and 1/2 cup of 10-10-10- fertilizer for each bushel (8 gal.) of mix. (An organic fertilizer alternative can be made from 1/2 cup blood-meal or cottonseed meal, 1 cup of rock phosphate, and 1/2 cup of kelp meal.

This fact sheet was adapted with permission from The Composting Council's National Backyard Composting Program Training Manual (1996).

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