

Diggin' in the Dirt: Buying Topsoil

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Adding organic matter to gardens

Organic matter is a valuable addition to all gardens. It improves soil textures and adds nutrient holding capacity to the soil. The stimulation of biological life as the material breaks down can reduce disease problems.

However, adding organic matter can tie up nitrogen for a period of time. This can hurt plant growth, especially annual flowers and vegetables. The degree of tie-up relates to the relative amounts of humus and un-decomposed residues in the material. If the material has completely composted, there is almost no tie-up. If the material is mostly "raw," the tie-up can be substantial.

The way around the problem is to add extra nitrogen to feed the decomposer organisms. A standard recommendation is to add 3#s of actual nitrogen for each cubic yard of organic matter. This is in addition to the fertilizer needed for the crop itself.

So how do you figure how much to add? If you use a synthetic source of nitrogen like urea (46-0-0) or ammonium sulfate (21-0-0), calculate the extra N based on the percentages in the material. For ammonium sulfate that would be $3/21 = 14$ pounds. Urea would be $3/46 = 6.5$ pounds. If you use an organic fertilizer like Biogro, it has about 7% N, thus you need $3/07 = 43$ pounds of the fertilizer.

Remember, these amounts are in

addition to the fertilizer you planned to apply to feed your vegetables or flowers.

See this site for more information: <http://www.extension.org/pages/13048/soils-and-composting:-soil-improvement>

We also have a great publication called Fertilizing Home Gardens available from our office or on-line at <https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/sites/catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/files/project/pdf/ec1503.pdf>

Buying topsoil

When you buy topsoil, make sure you know what you are buying. Since there's no legal definition of 'topsoil,' you could be getting just about anything.

People think that 'topsoil' is better than other soil, because it contains more organic material. But it isn't necessarily so. Topsoil is just surface soil. That's all you can claim about it. It isn't always good material for home gardens.

Don't buy any loads of topsoil sight unseen. Go to the location where the topsoil is stored and investigate.

If an on-site inspection isn't possible, inspect the load in the truck before it is dumped into your yard.

Topsoil shoppers should keep the following information in mind:

Just because something is sold as "topsoil," it isn't necessarily of desirable soil texture. Topsoil can range from clayey to sandy material. The best texture for gardening is loam, or sandy loam, with fairly equal proportions of

sand, silt and clay.

To estimate the amount of sand or clay in a batch of top soil, take along a small container of water. Mix some of the soil you're considering buying with water.

Make a mixture with bread dough consistency. If the soil forms a sticky mass, there's too much clay. If it feels gritty and watery, there's too much sand. Good garden loam should not feel very sticky.



Take a handful of damp topsoil and squeeze it in your fist. If it is loam, it will form a ball that easily breaks apart.

If you do not find exactly the right soil, modify it with compost. Addition of organic material will increase its water holding capacity, make the soil easier to work up for planting and make it more hospitable to plant roots. You can add sand to soils but only if you are adding an equal volume of organic matter at the same time. For example, if you wanted to add 4 inches of sand, also add 4 inches of compost at the same time. If you don't do that, you risk making a low grade concrete out of your clay.

It is not unusual to bring in some nasty weeds in with the topsoil. Of particular concern is horsetail or equisetum. It is helpful to look at the soil prior to purchase with an eye to the weeds that are present at the time or the remains of weeds from the previous season.

Topsoil is usually sold by volume, in cubic yard units. When ordering or buying topsoil, a good rule of thumb is to remember that one cubic yard of topsoil will cover about 50

square feet of garden to a depth of about four to six inches.

Adapted from an article by John Hart, Emeritus OSU Soils Specialist.

Food Safety or Food Preservation Questions? OSU Extension Service Has Answers.

Are you planning to preserve food from your garden or purchased from a farm this summer? If so, call or visit the OSU Extension Service office before you start canning, freezing, or drying. Costly and potentially harmful mistakes can be made by using outdated canning recipes and instructions. You can find free publications at the Columbia County Extension office located at 505 N. Columbia River Highway in St. Helens (across from the Legacy Clinic). If you have questions, phone the office at 503 397-3462. You can download for free all our food preservation publications at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/fch/food-preservation>. An additional great resource is the National Center for home Food Preservation at <http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/>.

Take excess produce to the food bank, senior centers, or community meals programs. Cash donations to buy food are also greatly appreciated.

The Extension Service offers its programs and materials equally to all people.

Free newsletter

The Oregon State University Extension office in Columbia County publishes a monthly newsletter on gardening and farming topics (called County Living) written/edited by yours truly. All you need to do is ask for it and it will be mailed to you. Call 503 397-3462 to be put on the list. Alternatively, you can sign up for email notification of when to find the latest edition on the web at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/columbia/>.

Contact information for the Extension office

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