

Gardener's gold and other goodies

By Linda Roe

Years ago, while attending a fundraising auction for my children's band trip, I bought a 10-yard load of compost donated by a local dairy. My kids couldn't believe that, of all the cool stuff to bid on ... compost? But I knew I had gold, gardener's gold. Why all the excitement? It's because compost does many wonderful things for your soil and plants.

There are three basic types of soil: sand, silt and clay. While soil can contain any combination of these, around here it seems to be sand or clay. Sand has large particles and feels gritty in your hands. Water drains quickly through sand and roots have a hard time getting enough to drink without constant watering. Sandy soils tend to be low in nutrition. The addition of compost to sandy soils increases moisture retention and adds nutrients for the growing plant.

Clay soil, on the other hand, has microscopic particles that tend to stick together and it feels like you can make a brick out of it. Roots cannot penetrate through and water drains very slowly. Adding compost to clay soil opens up the clay particles, helping the roots grow out through the soil and letting the water drain more freely. Compost also gives soil microbes something to "chew on" as it decomposes fur-

ther. This will release more nutrients to the plant roots. Used as mulch, compost "feeds" your plants while keeping down weeds. Be sure to weed before applying your mulch because weeds like compost, too.

So, what is compost? Compost is basically decomposed organic matter. It can be anything, from twigs to carrot tops. Manure may be part of compost, but compost does not always have manure in it. You can make your own or you can buy it in bags. In bags, it is found with various formulations and labels. "Soil Building Compost" is somewhat "barky" and is a great mulch or addition to help break up clay. "Planting Compost" may have more manure in it and is a good compost to add when planting a new plant. Composted manure has a higher level of nitrogen and is great for adding to the vegetable garden or berries. Other formulations may include compost with potting soil for raised beds or large containers. Most plants will love any of these mixes.

There are a few caveats, however. Alpine plants, many herbs and some wildflowers prefer a poor, fast draining soil, while bog plants love clay muck. In addition, bagged compost mixes have lime added as a pH neutralizer. This is good, except for acid lovers such as rhodies and blueberries. Compost is good for these plants too, but they prefer something

acidic added to it. I have had luck with used coffee grounds and cottonseed meal around these plants. Also, be aware that it is better to dig and amend a wide shallow hole than a deep narrow one when planting in clay.

Compost and manure may be all you need for good plant growth, but many cultivated garden plants do better with a bit of fertilizer. You will find single ingredient fertilizers such as alfalfa meal or bone meal. You will also find plant specific fertilizers such as rhodie food or rose food.

Fertilizers have three main ingredients: nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, referred to as N-P-K. These are the numbers listed on the fertilizer box. They represent a ratio of one to another. Nitrogen encourages lush green growth; therefore, the first number will be high on lawn fertilizer because you want lush green growth. Phosphorus and potassium work together to stimulate root growth and aid in flower and fruit production. Therefore, they will be higher than the nitrogen on bulb food and bloom booster. Plant specific fertilizers also include special goodies for the listed plant. For example, rhodie food will have acid-based fertilizer and rose food will have alfalfa meal.

The difference between organic and chemical fertilizers may be confusing. Simply put,



organic fertilizer is formulated with naturally occurring ingredients. Chemical fertilizers are synthesized in their pure chemical form. Chemical fertilizers act quickly and wash away. They need to be reapplied more often. Organic fertilizers break down slowly over time and not only feed the plant but also improve the soil quality. There is a time to use both in the garden. I use organic in the garden and chemical liquid on my container annuals.

When do you "work your dirt?" Spring is the usual time, before growth really begins. I chipped away at my pile for months. I threw compost on the vegetables, around the fruit trees and berries, in all the flower beds and finally, on my lawn. The results were amazing. My shoulders and back don't do yards of compost anymore, but small bags and a handtruck can accomplish the same results. ■