

NEWS RELEASE
September 11, 2002

WINTER GARDEN PREPARATION

BACKYARD HORTICULTURE
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With the last few days of cool weather in Mariposa, at least some thoughts have moved to fall and winter gardening. This is also a good time to add organic matter and other amendments to the soil, allowing the winter rains to help decompose and release valuable nutrients.

One of the most popular and readily available organic soil amendments is manure. All home gardeners know that when properly used, manures can improve soil in a number of important ways.

Manures are considered soil amendments for two reasons: they add bulky material, forming large soil pores that allow water and air to move more readily through the soil; and they provide food for the microorganisms living in the soil. The soil microbes that are actively decomposing organic matter improve soil structure. Most soils in Mariposa County seldom have more than 1 percent organic matter. Our environmental conditions usually favor a very rapid breakdown of added organic amendments like manure. However, you can maintain a relatively good soil structure in your garden by adding manure at least annually. Manures also supply plants with small quantities of mineral nutrients, so they are also considered fertilizers as well as amendments.

Manures vary in the amounts of nutrients they contain. Chicken manure is the most concentrated type. It may contain 2 to 4 percent nitrogen, 1 to 3 percent phosphorus and 1 to 2 percent potassium, as well as smaller amounts of other nutrients. Steer manure, the other commonly available type, may contain up to 2 percent nitrogen, 0.5 percent phosphorus, 2 percent potassium and small amounts of other nutrients. Because of the relatively small amounts of nutrients in manures, you'll need to use them often and in fairly large amounts if you want to use them as your only fertilizer source for your vegetable garden and fruit trees. Many gardeners supplement manure applications with commercial fertilizers, especially nitrogen-containing fertilizers.

When using manure on a yearly basis, decrease the amount you apply each year up to the fourth year. The reason for this is that some of the manure applied the first year will still be in the soil the next year. For example, apply about 100 pounds of dry dairy or steer manure per 100 square feet the first year. The second year apply about 70 pounds, the third year 60 pounds and about 50 pounds every year thereafter.

Apply manure at least a month before planting. Mix it into the top few inches of the soil and irrigate to allow the manure to begin decomposition and to wash excess harmful salts out of the root zone. Manure can cause severe injury or even kill seedlings if applied too heavily or too closely to planting time. Raw or poorly decomposed manure is also associated with root maggots, as well as many weed seeds. Be sure the manure is adequately aged or composted before you use it. Other good sources of organic matter include redwood shavings, peat moss and, of course, homemade compost.

By planning, and acting, now, you can have a ready-to-go garden site next spring.

The University of California Cooperative Extension office, at the Mariposa Fairgrounds, has a free leaflet available on “Compost in a Hurry.”



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