

HOME & GARDEN

Improve your soil — make compost

By PAT LEUCHTMAN
Recorder Columnist

The bad news is in. I recently got back the results of my super-duper soil test from the Soil and Planting Testing Lab in Waltham. They were disastrous.

The pH was 5.7 which is slightly more acid than one would like, but it is tolerable. I'll just have to do another liming in the fall. A pH of 6 to 6.5 is more desirable for a vegetable garden.

However, the levels of nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium and magnesium, the major nutrients needed for plant growth and development, were very low. Even the levels of micro-nutrients, zinc, boron, manganese,

molybdenum, copper and iron were very low. (At least the levels of heavy metals were also low. I don't want lead, cadmium, arsenic or aluminum in the soil.)

Now I know just how far I have to go before I can develop a super soil that is rich in macro- and micro-nutrients and also rich in humus that will increase the tilth and water-holding capacity of the soil.

This year as usual, I did manure the garden before planting, but the soil is so depleted that I will have to make a special effort to bring the soil fertility up to a good level and then maintain it. My plan is to heavily manure any areas that I have not yet planted, as well as areas that will be replanted during the season with succession crops. I will also be adding side-dressings of aged manure and compost, and if I do any watering, I will use manure tea. I don't make a fancy manure tea. I soak a shovelful or two of manure in a trash can of water for a few days and then use that water which is now saturated with some of the nutrients from the manure in the garden.

Compost is an important part of my fertilization program. Compost is created by mixing, watering and letting various organic materials rot into a fluffy, black, rich fertilizer. You can use almost anything that comes to hand. Because they are

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abundant at my house, I usually use leaves, cow and poultry manure, grass clippings, kitchen refuse and weeds. If you have them, you can also use seaweed, rotted hay, straw and sawdust. Compost can be made of any organic materials you can get your hands on.

The standard way of making compost is in a pile. It should be at least 5-by-5-by-5 feet. Anything smaller will not decompose as quickly and efficiently. You can begin a pile with a layer of vegetable matter, then add a thinner layer of nitrogen rich materials like manure, blood meal, bone meal or cottonseed meal. It is this layer of nitrogenous material that will get the pile cooking so be generous. Then add a layer of soil and a sprinkling of lime or wood ashes, and possibly some rock phosphate. Repeat this layering until you have used all the material you have available. Don't worry if you don't finish a pile in one day; add to it as you pea vines, manure or grass clippings accumulate. When you have finished your pile for one session, make an indentation in the top to collect rainfall. Moisture is very important to the rapid heating up and decomposition of the compost. If it doesn't rain, you may want to water the pile. Last year my pile composted very slowly because I didn't keep it moist enough.

Air is also important to the decomposition process. I poke holes in my pile with one of my bean poles and every so often I, or one of my conscripted children, goes out to give it a turning. The

turning mixes in air and also brings the out layers into the center where the heat builds up and decomposes the pile.

Making compost can take a year, depending on the size of material you are using. For instance, cornstalks take a very long time to break down unless they are chopped first. A carefully tended pile can be used in three or four months and you can even make compost in 14 days if you use a lot of nitrogenous materials and shred all other materials and are careful about water and air.

Compost doesn't have to be finished to be valuable. I have side-dressed plants in the summer with half-finished compost. It is lumpy and you can still discern the original elements, but it is broken down enough to provide a gentle fertilizer.

Last summer I grew tomatoes around the outside of metal mesh rings. The rings were handy as supports and I filled the centers with hay, manure, and half-finished compost so that every time it rained nutrients were washed into the soil for the tomatoes to use. I had extraordinarily good luck with my tomatoes, especially considering what I now know about the fertility of my soil.

I have also buried aged manure underneath my mulch, and sometimes even buried my kitchen refuse out in the garden in my own casual version of sheet composting.

Composting can be done very scientifically or very casually and in the end you will probably end up with the same finished product. It will just take more or less time, so don't be intimidated by complicated directions, mine or anyone else's.

By the way, I do recommend the very complete soil test that is available for only \$2 from the Soil and Planting Testing Lab, 240 Beaver St., Waltham 02254. You can get a special soil sample envelope and directions from the Extension Service at the courthouse.

You will get a readout of the macro- and micro-nutrient levels along with excellent information on how to interpret the test results, fertilizer recommendations and information on the best ways to fertilize including when and how much manure to add.

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