

## Organic Amendments Enrich Gardens

Many people are growing vegetables by using some basic gardening procedures that are fundamental to preserving the environment. Organic gardeners use only naturally occurring materials to improve the soil, fertilize plants and minimize pest problems. This growing process is healthy for the environment, and the resulting produce is healthy for us.

The Florida legislative definition of 'organic' excludes the use of all synthetic chemicals on vegetables grown for sale. But the law doesn't apply to our own home gardens, so why should we strive to reduce or eliminate chemicals? In a growing population and a suffering environment, we can all make this contribution to conserving our natural resources.

A major concept of organic gardening is the use of organic materials to build up the soil and add needed nutrients for plants. In our poor, sandy soil, organic amendments are very important for gardening success. Generally, organic matter can be defined as the remains or direct products of plants and animals. Gardeners often use bird and animal manures, cover crops, plant manures, compost and sea products.

After being applied to the soil, organic material is broken down by soil organisms such as fungi, bacteria, insects and worms. Nitrogen and other needed nutrients are converted to forms that the plant can use during this process. Organic matter not only provides nutrients, but it also helps the soil retain water and improves the structure of the soil.

In Florida, about 19 million tons of solid waste is collected annually and taken to landfills. About 15% of this solid waste is yard waste, including leaves and grass clippings from lawns. Learn how to keep your yard waste and turn it into gardening amendments at <http://sarasota.ifas.ufl.edu/compost-info>

Your garden will benefit from an application of up to 2 pounds per square foot of composted yard waste each year. We have many oak leaves in North Florida and these leaves make great soil amendments. The leaves break down slowly, so an additional 1 pound of animal manure will help even out the decomposition rate.

Consider using more environmentally friendly gardening practices this year. The Master Gardeners can help answer your gardening questions at 752-5384. Attend an Extension workshop, "Plant Propagation for Gardeners", presented at the Fort White Public Library on Thursday, January 17<sup>th</sup> at 5:45 pm. This workshop will also be held in Lake City at the downtown library on Saturday, January 19<sup>th</sup> at 1:30 pm. *(Published 1-6-13)*