

## Using compost: in your garden, greenhouse and houseplants

*by Crystal Stinson*

“I can’t believe your geraniums,” my mother-in-law tells me one afternoon as we sit down for a cup of tea, “every time I visit they always seem to have at least 8 or 10 blooms. Gorgeous”.

I thank her for her compliment and tell her my secret:

“I added compost to the soil last year, and it’s been doing that ever since.”

Our family of four has been composting for years – both back-yard composting of our garden waste and in-doors composting with kitchen scraps (with red-wiggler worms). Composting takes time, and it took a while before our compost was ready to use. And once some was ready to use, the question was, what do we do with it?

Well finished compost is dark brown, has a crumbly or fine texture, and smells like the earth. There are several ways that you can use it – mixing it into the garden soil, top-dressing a lawn, spreading it around trees and shrubs, tree-planting, making a potting mix, making compost tea, and mulching. All of these methods add valuable nutrients – nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium to the soil. Soil that has been amended with compost has better structure, retains moisture better, encourages a healthy population of beneficial soil microorganisms, and will grow healthier plants that are better able to resist disease.

My first priority was to use compost in my garden and greenhouse to be able to improve the soil and grow delicious vegetables. Since the soil was in pretty bad shape, I added about 10 cm of compost and rototilled it in to a depth of about 15 cm. Each year since, I add a bit more (2-3 cm) and mix it in, but not as much as that first year.

You can also use compost to top-dress an established lawn. At the same time that you aerate your lawn (punching holes in the lawn to increase oxygen to the roots), you can spread a layer of compost, 3 mm to 1.25 cm thick, with a rake (and then water it well). For areas that you are preparing to seed or sod, spread a layer of about 2.5 cm – 5 cm thick and rototill. Or, if you have just seeded a lawn, you can spread a light dusting of compost over it to help the seedlings grow faster. Fall or spring is the best time to add compost to your lawn.

Spreading compost around the base of trees and shrubs is another way to use compost. You can apply a 2.5 cm layer around the base of the tree out to the drip line. You can then cover it with another type of organic mulch (wood chips or pine needles for example) to retain moisture and keep it in place. Be sure not to put the compost too close to the trunk of the tree as it may look like very nice bedding for some rodent who will snack on the tree bark!

Compost can also be used when planting new trees. When you dig the hole to plant your tree, mix the soil that you took out of the ground with 30% compost and use this mixture as backfill for your new tree.

Another great way to use compost, especially if you don't have a lot to work with, is to create your own potting soil mixture. Use 1/3 compost, 1/3 garden soil, 1/3 sand and mix for an ideal potting soil.

Compost tea is not something that you would want to serve guests, but it is something that your plants will benefit from. Take an old burlap bag and half fill with compost. Add the "teabag" to a large garbage container full of water and let it brew for a few days, stirring every so often. Once it is nice and brownish, fill up your water jug and water all of your vegetables, flowers and houseplants. You can dilute with water if it gets too strong.

If your compost isn't quite ready yet (it still has some un-composted material in it), then it can be used as mulch. You can spread it around the base of trees or shrubs to suppress weeds and as the plant gets water, nutrients will get washed into the root zone. You don't want to mix un-finished compost into the soil, however, because this will deplete the soil of nitrogen as the material completes the decomposition process. Eventually, the nitrogen will be returned to the soil, but in the mean time, your plants may not have access to the nitrogen they require. However, using unfinished compost may also spread weed seeds or pathogens that haven't been killed off by the composting process, so it may be wise to allow compost to finish completely before using.

Happy composting!