

Sources. Table 1 summarizes common sources of organic matter, their advantages and disadvantages, and considerations for use. Select an organic matter source based on cost, availability and information listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Common organic matter sources, their advantages and disadvantages, and special considerations for use.

Source	Advantages	Disadvantages	Considerations
Livestock manures	high in nutrients	high in salts and weed seeds	apply no more than 1 inch annually
Composted manure	high in nutrients	high in salts and weed seeds	apply no more than 1 inch annually
Composted urban green waste	recycles a waste	rapid decomposition	
Wood residues (bark, chips, sawdust)	long lasting	immobilize (tie up) nitrogen in soil	apply 1 lb of nitrogen per 100 lbs of material
Green waste (grass clippings, leaves)	readily available; recycles a waste	rapid decomposition	
Peat and peat moss	acidic; lowers soil pH	expensive	incorporate thoroughly
Straw	readily available	immobilize (tie up) nitrogen in soil	apply 1 lb of nitrogen per 100 lbs of material
Shredded paper or cardboard	recycles waste; recycles a waste	immobilize (tie up) nitrogen in soil	apply 1 lb of nitrogen per 100 lbs of material

Rates. One inch of organic matter added to annual planting areas each year will maintain or gradually improve soil conditions. If more organic matter is needed to significantly improve new sites, or in areas where perennial plants will be established, consider combining one inch of a high salt material like manure or compost with 1 to 3 inches of low salt material (see Table 1).

Ways to add organic matter. In annual planting areas organic matter can be spread on the soil surface and incorporated with a tiller or shovel. Double digging is removing the surface 6 to 12 inches of soil and mixing it with organic matter in a pile (first digging). Additional organic matter is added and incorporated with a tiller or shovel in the hole or depression created by the excavation (second digging). Soil from the first digging is then replaced. Double digging is labor intensive but increases the depth to which soil can be amended with organic matter.

Green manuring refers to the process of growing plants on a site and then tilling the area to incorporate all of the organic matter while the plants are still green. In this way gardeners can grow their own organic matter rather than bring an external source in.

Applying a thick layer of organic mulch such as wood chips or shredded bark is one way to amend the soil around established perennial plants. Organisms will move between the soil and mulch layer and gradually incorporate organic matter into the root zone of the perennials. This eliminates the need to till around established perennials, potentially damaging their root systems.

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This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work. Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Jack M. Payne, Vice President and Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Utah State University.