

# BEST PRACTICES



## Soil Amending for Ornamental and Native Plants

The term “amending”, when used in relation to soil treatment, is probably unclear to many gardeners. The definition of soil amendment given in *The Nature and Properties of Soils* by Nyle Brady reads, “Any substance such as lime, sulfur, gypsum and sawdust used to alter the properties of soil, generally to make it more productive. Strictly speaking, fertilizers are soil amendments, but the term is used most commonly for materials other than fertilizers.” For this discussion, fertilizers will be included.

In general, vegetables demand richer, more fertile soils than ornamentals. Native plants, because they are adapted to the original, local soil conditions and climate, are the least demanding. Nearly all classes of plants benefit from fertilizing, as well as from working the soil to incorporate organic matter, such as compost, in order to modify the soil texture and structure. This improves air supply to the roots and aids drainage or retains moisture, as needed. It also creates a more favorable environment and food energy for beneficial microbes and earthworms. Usually the microbes, earthworms and plants themselves require or benefit from being fed added nutrients, and at least 20 nutrient elements, mostly minerals, are needed in fertilizing.

Adding soil amendments will result in faster, stronger growth and greater internal resistance, which means little or no need for pesticides. Additionally, if you use natural and organic fertilizers, they are taken up more completely and present little chance of causing a pollution problem or health risk; plus, they work as well or better than synthetic and highly soluble fertilizers.

When fertilizing, it is far better to use a complete, nutrient-balanced fertilizer than one that is heavy on one component, such as nitrogen. Recipes can be found for making your own complete organic fertilizer, or you can get pre-blended products at nurseries and garden centers. Just make sure they contain a good array of nutrient minerals to supply your plants “the full meal deal.”

*Unsure what your soil needs? Have your soil professionally tested.  
Contact Thurston Conservation District at 360-754-3588.*

*Thanks to guest author, Gary Kline, owner of Black Lake Organic Nursery and Garden Store, for this article.  
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