



# Improving Your Soil with Compost and Mulch

to reduce runoff and protect water quality



## Why improve your soil?

Improving your soil with compost and mulch feeds the soil life that creates structure and pore spaces, so that rain water can easily soak into the soil. That helps reduce runoff from your yard during big storms, which can help reduce flooding, sewer overflows, and stream erosion. Improving your soil can also save you money by reducing summer irrigation needs, because your plants grow deeper roots and the soil holds more water. Healthier plants have fewer pest and disease problems and need less fertilizer. So you'll need fewer chemicals, which is good for your family's health and our environment. The beneficial soil organisms (fed by compost and mulch) also break down pollutants, and they help move carbon dioxide (a greenhouse gas) from the atmosphere into long-term storage in the soil.



Healthy plants grow in healthy soil.

A teaspoonful of healthy soil may contain 4 billion beneficial organisms!

Build soil life in your yard using compost and mulch.

## Three steps to building healthy soil:

### 1) Amend the soil with compost

- Dig or till 2-4 inches of compost into the upper 8-12 inches of soil when preparing beds or new lawn areas for planting. *Amend the whole bed. Amending just the planting holes can limit root growth.* Loosen compacted soils, such as in former parking or paved areas.
- Improve existing lawns by aerating, then raking ¼ to ½ inch of compost in, spring or fall.
- Make your own compost at home, or buy it in bags or in bulk – call the Garden Hotline below to learn how.

### 2) Mulch existing plantings regularly

- Spread mulch in the spring or fall, to control weeds and conserve water, reduce runoff, and prevent erosion (keep 1 inch away from tree trunks). Renew mulch layers annually.
- On garden beds and around shallow-rooted annuals, mulch with 1-2 inches of compost, shredded leaves, or grass clippings.
- Around trees and woody perennials, use 2-4 inches of wood chips (from a tree service) or leaves. Medium-sized bark mulch (fine bark can repel water) is a second choice.
- Save your fall leaves, or gather them for free – they're a great mulch for most plants.
- Use conifer tree needles as a mulch around conifer trees, or around acid-loving plants.
- Mulch-mow (leave the clippings) on your lawn, to build denser turf, deeper roots, and a drought resistant, healthy lawn.



### 3) Avoid using chemicals, and choose organic or slow-release fertilizers

- Pesticides (weed and bug killers) like “weed-and-feed” may hurt beneficial soil life, wildlife, and our families' health too – use the resources below to find better alternatives.
- Over-fertilization with quick-release chemical fertilizers is also bad for soil life, and harms our lakes, streams, and Puget Sound by causing algae blooms. (The algae later dies, and uses up oxygen in the water as it decomposes, suffocating fish).
- Fertilize moderately (compost can replace most fertilizer needs), and look for the words “natural organic” or “slow-release” on the fertilizer bag. They cost a little more but they feed plants a long time, and they don't wash away in the first rainstorm.



## Questions? Expert answers are a call or click away!

Learn all about compost, mulch, natural lawn & garden care and more at [www.seattle.gov/util/services/yard](http://www.seattle.gov/util/services/yard) or contact the **Garden Hotline** at (206) 633-0224, email [help@gardenhotline.org](mailto:help@gardenhotline.org)  
For more RainWise ideas, call the Hotline or see the website below.

Learn more at [www.seattle.gov/util/rainwise](http://www.seattle.gov/util/rainwise)

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