

# What kind of fertilizer should I use?



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*Ask a Master Gardener*

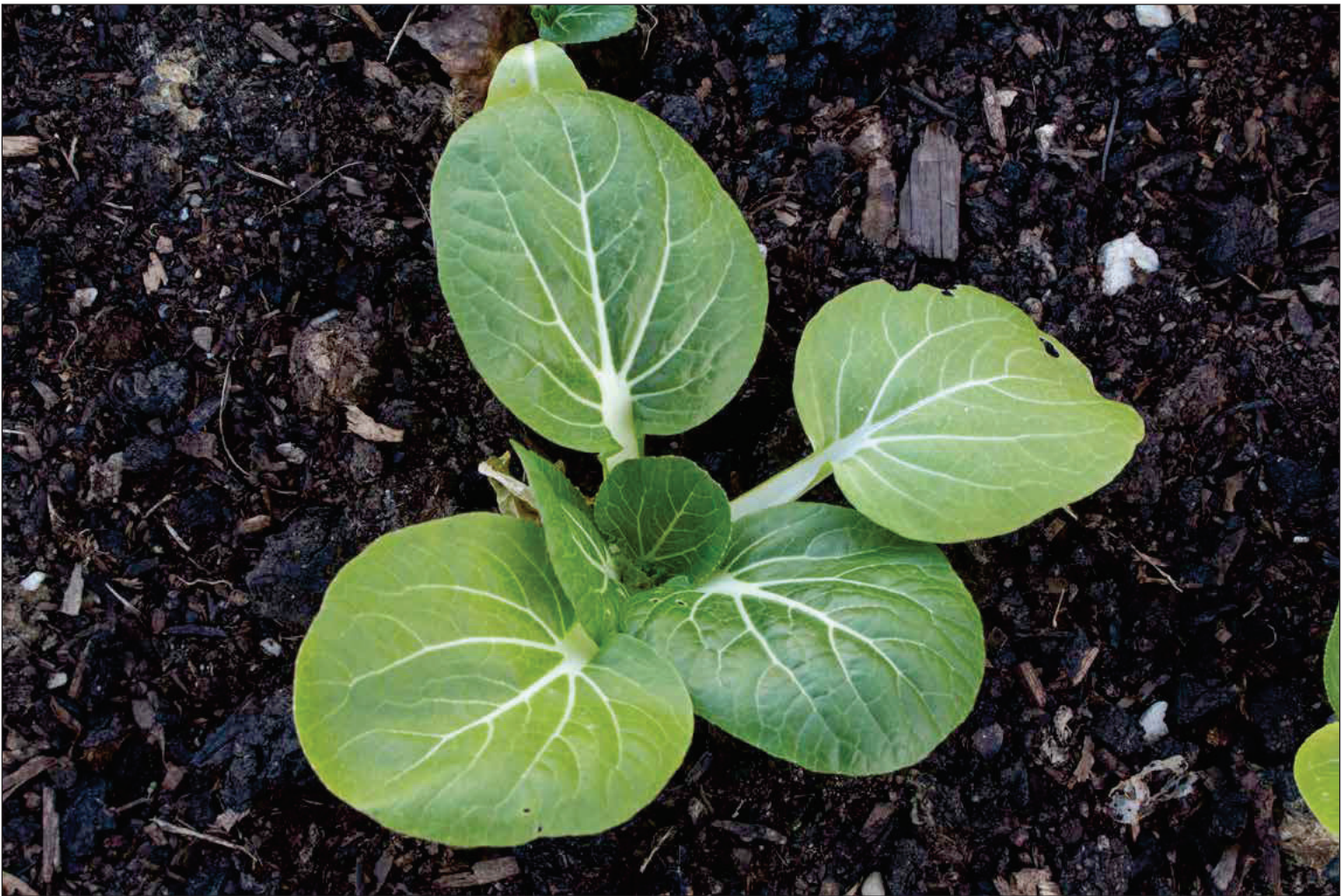
**Question:** I know that taking care of my garden soil is probably the most important factor in having a successful garden. However, when I go to a garden center, I am overwhelmed by the many choices available with different bags of material that I could add to my garden. I want to add only what my soil really needs, and I don't want to spend money unnecessarily. Would you explain what I should focus on when it comes to making sure I have productive garden soil?

**Answer:** Yes, you are correct. The health of your garden soil determines how successful your garden will grow.

If you are going to invest money and time into creating a beautiful and productive garden, it only makes sense to spend adequate time on the foundational element, the soil. A healthy garden is only as healthy as its soil.

First, have your soil tested – especially if this is the first year in a particular location. A soil test will indicate the amount and availability of nutrients in your soil. Gather small amounts of soil from about eight well-scattered spots in your garden, mix them together, dry at room temperature, wrap in a Ziplock bag, label the bag with the location from which you gathered the soil and take to a soil testing laboratory.

Knowing the nutrient levels of your soil allows you to add just the right amount of fertilizer. This will save you money and will also protect the environment from excess fertilizer runoff. Call a local soil testing company or the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic if you have questions about soil testing.



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There are many soil amendments from which to choose. The overall desire of a gardener is to improve the outcome of whatever is being grown.

If you don't have your soil tested, you can add an all-purpose fertilizer. Ask the garden personnel for specific recommendations for the area in which you live. Follow the directions on the label in order to apply the proper amount. Every bag of fertilizer has three numbers connected with hyphens on the label, such as 10-10-10. Those numbers are the NPK ratio - the percentages of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium in the fertilizer.

If you want to purchase an organic fertilizer, you must see "All-Natural Organic" on the label. When you read the fine print on an organic label, ingredients such as blood meal, poultry litter, bone meal, natural grains, and seaweeds will be listed.

I agree with you that there are so many bags to choose from when visiting the local garden center. How do you

know what to buy? Let's see if I can clear that up a bit.

Compost is decomposed or partially decomposed organic mater that is dark in color and crumbly in texture. When compost is mixed into soil, the soil resists compaction and drains quickly yet still retains an enormous amount of water. It is an excellent source for microorganisms, which later release nutrients to your plants.

You can buy compost by the bag, and in the Roseburg area, you can also buy it by the dump truck load and have it delivered. However, most gardeners make their own compost year after year. It is not difficult to make your own. It just takes some effort and knowledge of the basics.

Humus is the product that remains after most of the plant and animal residues in it have been decomposed. It is rich in nutrients and organic matter and highly beneficial to both

the soils and crops grown in the soil. Humus mixed with soil becomes a loosely structured soil mixture that soaks up water and prevents wasteful runoff.

Manure contains large amounts of nutrients. Proper use of manure in the garden is important because adding too much can lead to nitrate leaching, nutrient runoff, and excessive vegetative growth.

Artificial media, also called soilless media, contain no actual soil at all. They are often made up of various things such as peat, vermiculite, bark, or coir fiber (ground coconut hulls). Most of the time your choice of media will depend on what you want to grow.

Succulents, herbs and perennials tend to prefer soils that are well drained and not retaining a lot of moisture over a long period of time. For them you might choose media that are coarse in texture containing

more bark or perlite.

For tropicals and foliage plants, you might choose a media with more peat and less coarse material as these plants tend to prefer moist growing conditions.

There are many soil amendments from which to choose. The overall desire of a gardener is to improve the outcome of whatever is being grown. There is no quick and easy answer to give you in terms of what to buy. I would suggest that you do your research on what your plants need, and then find out the advantages and disadvantages of a particular soil amendment before buying anything.

*Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), by phone at 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.*