

# Protect garden soil before winter

**A**s the rainy season begins the annual recharge of our parched soils, it is a good time to remember a few important gardening steps to take before winter is upon us.

The most important gardening practice for winter, in my opinion, is to get a good cover of organic mulch over any bare soil in your landscape. This mulch can be compost or shredded leaves from your own yard or shredded bark from a local business. Why would we want to cover bare soil? Preventing compaction and erosion are the two main reasons.

Think about what happens all winter when a steady rain, week after week, keeps pelting the ground. Serious compaction of soil can occur when raindrops hit the soil over and over again. When the soil



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*Extension Spotlight*

dries out in June, the surface of the soil becomes as hard as cement.

When placing about 2-3 inches of mulch in your landscape, make sure you do not pile the material up against tree trunks or the stems of shrubs. Leave a few inches of space around the trunks so field mice, voles and other rodents don't have shelter where they can feed on the bark of your plants.

Over time, mulch will decompose and the organic matter will slowly feed your soil thanks to the microorganisms

that thrive in a soil with organic matter. The mulch that covers the soil will also help break up heavy raindrops absorbing some moisture and increasing the amount of rainfall that recharges soil ground water.

Mulching soil to prevent erosion is especially important to landscapes that are on significant slopes.

Another timely and important step to take now is to trim back the deteriorating tops of herbaceous perennial and annual plants, especially if they had diseases during the growing season. Take your garden trimmings to the compost heap and you can eventually recycle material back to your own garden soil. If you have a shredder or can run over your trimmings with a mulching mower first, your composting process will go a lot faster.

There is more and more evidence that if you can get your compost pile to heat up to 140 degrees, putting diseased plant material in the pile will not be a problem, nor will worrying about weed seeds surviving. Remember, every load of yard waste you can recycle at home does not have to be hauled to the landfill.

Your lawn is the one area of the landscape that does not need or want a leaf cover to protect it from the winter rain. Two good ways to utilize the leaves are to mulch mow your leaves back into the lawn or mulch mow and bag them for mulch material in your garden beds.

Fall is a good time to give your lawn an application of slow release fertilizer to help it recover from a long hot summer, especially if you let your

lawn dry out. A fall application of lime to your lawn every few years will also be beneficial if the pH of your soil is below 6, which is typical of our area. Our lawns are typically cool season grasses (perennial rye, bentgrass, red fescue, creeping fescue) that like to slow down or go dormant during the hot summer and reinvigorate in the fall and spring.

Remember if you have any gardening questions call our Extension office and ask for the Master Gardeners. Our Master Gardeners can still help you over the phone.

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