

# The 6 Cs of Soil Health: Tackling Climate Change with your Lawn and Garden

## The 6<sup>th</sup> C: Compost and Other Soil Improvers

**You can't go wrong with good compost.**

We all like to add things to try to improve our gardens and lawns, whether they be fertilizers or various organic soil improvers, such as compost, composted manures, peat moss, etc. But we should be aware that when we add these things we are interfering in a natural system.

Your underground workforce consists of living creatures, with the same physical needs that we have – food, water, air, and a safe habitat. Left to their own devices, as in natural ecosystems, they will build an environment in which they will have all of these things in abundance.

When we interfere in their lives by adding things to the soil, we should do so carefully and consciously. Otherwise, we may well do more harm than good. Here are some tips for nurturing your soil with inputs that help and do not harm your underground workforce.

- **Adding compost is always a good idea.** Compost feeds your soil critters, provides nutrients for your plants, builds organic matter in your soil, and generally helps out around the soil community. But it also has one special feature that other inputs don't have: it adds diversity to your soil. Diversity is good for several reasons (see the 5<sup>th</sup> C – Create Crop and Plant Diversity) and it can easily be lost. Some inputs can reduce diversity by giving advantages to some critters over others. However, mature compost will never harm your workforce or your plants and will add to soil diversity.
- **If you build a healthy soil, and add compost yearly, you can reduce your fertilizer.** In fact, some very healthy soils don't need any fertilizer at all, just some compost to replace any nutrients removed if you harvest. Your underground workforce will recycle the nutrients in the compost you add, plus get more nutrients out of the minerals in your soil. No extra feeding necessary.
- **Use all fertilizers, both synthetic and organic, carefully and conservatively.** As you build your workforce (using the 6 Cs) to an optimum size and strength, you will need to carefully manage your fertilizer use. This soil-building process may take a few years. During this time, it is very important not to overfeed. A soil test will help, but you need to remember that a soil test only tells you what is in the soil and available to the plants at the time the soil was sampled – it does not tell you how much nutrition your workforce will make available during the course of the season. This additional nutrition can be substantial in a healthy soil. As the natural fertility of your soil increases over time, the amounts of fertilizing inputs can be reduced.
- **Only use pesticides as and if necessary, never as a prevention technique.** As soils get healthier, so do plants. As plants get healthier, they protect themselves from diseases and pests (often working in partnership with your underground workforce). If you have a pest or disease problem, this is an indicator that the health of the soil is less than is needed to fully protect the plants at this time. In these cases, use pesticides if you must, but once the pest has been knocked back, double down on the 6 Cs!

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## Compost and Other Soil Improvers ... one of the 6Cs for Healthy Soil