

## Step #3: Nurture the soil.

Treat your soil with love and respect. 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 nature, they will construct an environment in which they will have these things in abundance. When we intervene in their lives with specific inputs, 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 beneficial inputs.

- Adding compost is always a good idea. Compost feeds your microbial workforce, 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 microbial diversity to your soil. Diversity is good for several reasons (see Step #5) and it can easily be lost. Some inputs can reduce diversity by giving advantages to some organisms over others. However, mature compost will never harm your workforce or your plants and will add to soil diversity. Finally, if you use synthetic fertilizer, adding compost offsets one of the most common potential negative impacts of fertilizer – loss of organic carbon.
- If you build a healthy soil and add compost yearly, you will not need much fertilizer. In fact, very healthy soils don't need any fertilizer at all, just some compost to replace any nutrients removed with the harvest. Your underground workforce will recycle the nutrients in the compost you add, plus extract nutrients from the minerals in your soil. No extra feeding necessary.
- Use all fertilizers, both synthetic and organic, carefully and conservatively. Until you build your workforce to a suitable size and strength (using these 5 steps), you will need to use fertilizer. 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. So keep fertilizer levels modest and reduce them each year as your soil's health improves.
- Only use pesticides 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 microbial workforce). If you have a pest or disease problem, this is an indicator that the health of the soil is less than needed for crop protection purposes. So once the problem is addressed, double down on the 5 steps described here.

