

Fall soil prep turbocharges garden for 2020 bounty

Spring weather makes us think about getting soil ready for gardening, but smart gardeners know fall prep is the key to next year's success. Fall is the best time to add organic matter.

Organic materials such as manure, compost, leaves, hay, and grass clippings add valuable carbon and plant nutrients to soil. They also feed the worms and microbes that keep the soil system functioning and healthy. Adding these materials in the fall gives all the soil critters plenty of time to work – releasing nutrients into the soil and creating the perfect home for plant roots.

Leave it messy

If you love your soil, don't leave it bare! Think about tucking the garden in under a cozy blanket instead of leaving it naked and cold all winter. Cut and leave the annual weeds (no seeds!), small plants, and any unharvested and undiseased veggies to recycle back into the soil. Remove larger, woody plants like corn stalks and

sunflowers. Cut these off near the surface of the soil and leave the roots in the ground. In the spring, you will be amazed how



photos: Caitlin Youngquist

Using a lawn mower to shred and pick up leaves makes a perfect blend for composting.

Woven wire fencing can be used to make simple, portable compost bins.

Fill these with grass clippings and leaves, coffee grounds, garden trimmings, vegetable scraps, etc. Put larger plants and woody stems through a wood chipper before composting so they will break down quickly. Layer materials as you fill the bins or mix on a tarp first.

Water is critical for all compost microbes. Make sure all raw materials are damp when the bins are filled and set the hose or sprinkler on the compost every couple of weeks to keep the microbes working.



many worms are living (and feasting) on these root balls.

Large, woody stems can be chipped for the compost pile or burned. If burned, put the ashes in the compost pile.

Mulch

Grass clippings and fall leaves are wonderful for soil, but you may find they blow away in the wind. Alfalfa hay makes great winter mulch, or clean grass hay without seeds. The flakes hold together and usually stay where you put them!

Moldy hay works well, and you can often get it for free. Mulch will protect the soil from heat during the growing season, conserves water, and reduces time spent weeding.

Manure and compost

Add 1-2 inches of manure or compost if available to your garden in the fall but don't rototill! Work your soil gently with a shovel or garden fork before planting in the spring. You can also make your own compost from leaves, grass clippings, coffee

grounds, vegetable waste, garden clippings, etc.

.....
Caitlin Youngquist is the University of Wyoming Extension agriculture and horticulture educator based in Washakie County and serving northern Wyoming. She is on a mission to retire all of the roto-tillers in Wyoming and can be reached at (307) 347-3431 or cyoungqu@uwyo.edu.



The Worland Community Garden under a cozy blanket of mulch. Note the bags of leaves collected for compost.