

Bluestem Breezes
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Adding Organic Matter to your Garden

It's been quite some time since Persons A and B appeared in this column. You are in luck now, as this is the week!

Person B has been removing compost piles from cattle lots lately. For you gardeners, it's beautiful; a lovely mixture of hay and manure composted for up to 2 years. It's dark and will till in to a vegetable garden just great! Person B offers to share some of his compost and bring it to Person A's garden. Person A would have preferred it in November, but who's going to complain about this offer? Let's be honest.

The compost arrives and is dropped in a line across the middle of the garden. Never mind that A is 7 months pregnant. She is bound to spread the compost herself. Thirty minutes in to this project, A resorts to the house for a sugar-free lemonade and the recliner. She calls B reluctantly for help and assumes this must be his grand plan – she'll give up and admit this is not the summer for a garden. But no, in his ever-patient voice, he assures her that his plan all along was to return and spread the compost himself (likely with something more like a tractor than a shovel, mind you).

And you see newlyweds, this is how communication works in marriages: A is so independent that B learns it's better in the long run for A to crash and burn with her own idea and B will swoop in for the win picking up the pieces left and right.

Now, how on earth will anything relevant come out of this story? Easy. Organic matter is worth the effort. Here is the scoop on organic matter from K-State Specialist Ward Upham:

Organic matter is vital. When incorporated into the soil, decaying organic residue serves several useful functions:

- Loosens tight clay soils to provide better drainage.
- Provides for better soil aeration which is necessary for good root growth.
- Increases the water-holding capacity of all soils. This is especially helpful on sandy soils.
- Makes soil easier to till and more easily penetrated by plant roots.
- Supplies nutrients for plant growth.

However, organic matter added in the spring should be well decomposed and finely shredded/ground. Manures and compost should have a good earthy smell without a hint of ammonia. Add a 2-inch layer of organic matter to the surface of the soil and work the materials into the soil thoroughly. Be sure soils are dry enough to work before tilling as wet soils will produce clods.

To determine if a soil is too wet to work, grab a handful and squeeze. If water comes out, it is much too wet. Even if no water drips out, it still may not be dry enough to work. Push a finger into the soil you squeezed. If it crumbles, it is dry enough, but if your finger just leaves an indentation, more time is needed. Be sure to take your handfuls of soil from the depth you plan to work the soil because deeper soils may contain more moisture than the surface.

Remember that manure and a composted hay/manure mix are two separate creatures in your garden. Manure provides a very rich fertilizer for your garden and the composting component provides a bit of an insurance policy. We want nutrients and other benefits, but we don't want to burn plants (or possibly prevent growth) due to high nutrient and salt levels. Soil testing is key here folks! And, moderation – apply both manure and compost in moderation.

For additional information on organic matter, fertilizing, and soil testing, contact the Extension Office (215 Kansas, Courthouse, Alma; kamayer@ksu.edu; 765-3821). For Bluestem Breezes archives, check out wabaunsee.ksu.edu.