



Spencer Horticultural Solutions

# Homegrown Horticulture

TIPS FOR SUCCESS IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD

## Soil Preparation – Steps We Sometimes Miss

Soil forms the foundation of all of our vegetable gardening efforts, yet we often overlook or miss key steps when preparing the soil for planting. Here are FIVE key steps (plus why they matter).

### 1. Adding organic (carbon-based) amendments

Adding organic matter in the form of compost, composted manure (whichever type), peat moss, or potting soil is an important task. Organic matter improves the quality of the soil, increases the ability of the soil to hold water and nutrients, plus it supplies nutrients over an extended period as it breaks down. As organic matter is added the soil becomes easier to work.

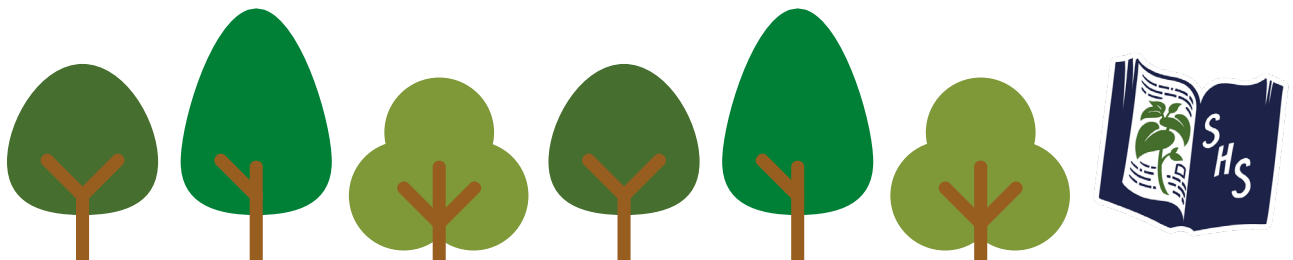
Ideally, these amendments should be added in the fall, after the growing season, so that they have time to settle and start to break down. However, they may be added to the soil in the early spring if they are completely worked into the soil, making sure to mix really well.

The amount of organic matter to add to the soil will vary. Adding a layer of material that is about 1-2 inches (2.5-5 cm) deep (about the length of your thumb) is probably adequate.

If you are purchasing something like peat moss in compressed bales, to get the number of bales you need to cover that area with 1 inch, divide the square footage of the area you are going to apply it to by 90 (for 3.8 cubic foot bales) or 50 (for 2.2 cubic foot bales). Double it for 2 inches.

For less compressed amendments, you will need about 0.8 cubic feet of amendment for every 10 square feet of ground you are covering 1 inch deep. A cubic foot is equal to 28 litres. Most bags come in either cubic feet or litres. An average wheelbarrow typically holds 2-3 cubic feet of material.

Make sure to work any amendment in fully into the soil to a depth of 6-8 inches.





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## 2. Working deep (beyond the surface of the soil)

It is important to mix the various layers of soil somewhat, using a garden fork, a shovel, or some other tool. This breaks up any compacted layers and redistributes the different elements of the soil. Try and work the soil to a depth of 8 to 12 inches (20 to 30cm). It will leave the soil a bit rough and chunky, but this is only temporary. This can be done in fall, spring, or both.

## 3. Incorporating trash and debris

Old plant parts and the leftovers from the previous growing season need to be incorporated so that they can start breaking down properly. Leaving them alone will mean you have uneven areas that might make seeding harder. If something is particularly woody or large, it might be better to remove it or break it up before trying to incorporate it.

## 4. Break up lumps

To make seeding and other planting activities easier, you need to break up the rough chunks on the soil surface. You aren't trying to pulverize the soil and make it too fine, but you want to avoid lots of pieces that are golf ball-sized or bigger. This can be done using a rototiller, or even something as simple as a rake.

## 5. Prepare the soil surface

Before you can seed, you need to smooth out the soil and make sure that the area where seeds are going to go is ready to receive them. All you are trying to do is make sure that there will be good seed-to-soil contact when you plant. You can rake the soil, just leveling things out generally.

If you've added amendments or if things look pretty fluffy (not solid), you might pack things a little bit before planting. A general guide is to walk gently across the surface of the soil. If you sink in deeply, it is a bit too fluffy. If you can still see your prints, but you didn't sink deep, you are probably where you want to be.

