Citrus Heights Water District

WaterSmart Foundation: Healthy Soil, Happy Landscape

Q&A

1. With regards to chicken manure, I have chickens and obviously a lot of manure. Is there a risk to creating too salty a compost if I use a lot of chicken manure?

Presenter Steve Zien says that the quick answer is “Yes”. Compost made from mostly manure could have a high concentration of salt. Adding other ingredients to the compost pile will improve the quality of the compost and reduce the salt concentration. If you made applications of the compost containing a lot of well composted chicken manure in fall, when early winter rains arrive, the salt content would be less of an issue because the rain would help leach out the excess salt.

2. How do you get the soil probe into hard soil?

It can be extremely difficult to push a soil probe (even a metal one) into hard clay soil when it is extremely dry. Wetting the probe sometimes helps, but if it is “hard”, that may not help. Go to another spot or two in your yard and try to insert the soil probe there. And, if it’s so hard that you still cannot insert it, that gives us one important piece of information and that is that, at least in the upper level of the soil, it is quite dry. If you have a good size screw driver, try inserting that into the soil. When soil is moist, the screwdriver can be pushed into it. Once you feel resistance or it’s difficult to push the screwdriver in farther, that’s the depth where the soil dry soil begins.

In most cases, if you slowly moisten the soil, allowing the moisture to move down into it, wait an hour or so, and try to use the soil probe again. You should be able to push a metal soil probe into the ground to the depth that the soil was moistened. If the soil is very high in clay or compacted, you will need to apply the water very slowly over a period of time. Soaker hoses can be helpful in this task. This is one way to raise the moisture level in the soil and be able to begin to gauge how long you need to water using whatever equipment (e.g., soaker hose, drip emitters, etc.) that you used.

3. Great plain speak! Where can I have my soil tested somewhere?

Steve Zien would recommend Peaceful Valley Farm Supply, making sure to get their complete soil analysis with their interpretive booklet. The recommendations in their booklet are pretty good, and they are a company that promotes organic horticulture and agriculture.

You want to use a soil testing service that will make organic recommendations. Some labs offer organic recommendations, but Steve cannot speak to the knowledge and expertise of the person making the organic recommendations. He’s read quite a few soil lab reports where they made organic recommendations; however, it was obvious to him (and keep in mind that he wrote organic soil analysis recommendations for over 40 years!), that they had little or no knowledge on how to manage a healthy soil food web and only substituted organic fertilizer materials where they would normally recommend a synthetic, chemical fertilizer. As a result, the recommendations weren’t reliable.

FYI, a year ago Steve Zien would have recommended his own company, but alas, he retired and no longer performs soil analyses -- no more 25-30 pages of organic soil management recommendations. Steve brings this up because his website has information on soil testing and, in particular, how to properly sample your soil. Take a look at the sampling instructions on his website at <http://www.organiclandscape.com/soil.htm> and follow the instructions so you get a good representative sample and do not contaminate the soil. If you do not collect and prepare the soil properly for analysis, the lab results will not be appropriate due to contamination (for example, you don’t want your hands to touch the sampled soil).

4. We are on an acre here in CH. Is there somewhere other than Hastie’s where we can purchase good quality organic compost in bulk? Thanks.

Although Steve wishes that he could give you a specific answer, that’s not possible for the following reasons: The quality of compost varies tremendously from one company to another. What is important to understand is that the quality of the compost, even from the same company, can vary greatly from one batch to the next. One reason is quality control, which can be a serious issue. Another reason is the raw material available for companies to make compost changes due to the season and other variables.

Steve’s known of cases where compost was purchased in bulk from the same company at different times and, while one batch was of good quality, the other was poor quality, and incapable of growing plants. Steve has also experienced that, in at least one case, a company knew they had a problem with their compost (it was killing plants), and they continued to sell it to unsuspecting customers. Because of these issues, he is unable to recommend a source for quality bulk compost.

If you need quantities that require the purchase of bulk compost, Steve recommends that you get a pH test kit (available at local nurseries and on line – do not use a pH meter because many are not accurate.). Then go to the landscape yard and ask to see the compost you are considering purchasing. Look at the compost pile. You should not be able to determine what any of the materials are that make up the pile (e.g., leaves, bark chips, etc.). Be sure to ask permission to test the compost first, and then test its pH. Ideally, it should be roughly in the range of 6.4 and 6.9. If well out of that range, do not purchase it.

While working with the compost, pay attention to what your nose tells you. The compost should smell pleasant and earthy. If it has a disagreeable odor, again, do not purchase it. Once you find a compost that looks and smells good and it has an appropriate pH, you can’t do much more to determine quality, so go ahead and purchase the material. Be sure to make it clear that you want the compost from the pile you tested and inspected. Suppliers go through a lot of compost and, by the time they get to loading up the truck for your delivery, that pile could have already left the yard. Steve recommends that you stay and watch them load it in the truck and follow the truck to make sure they deliver it to you. It is challenging to find high-quality bulk compost that is consistently available.

As a general rule, Steve suggests that you avoid purchasing compost made by a company that uses materials diverted from the landfill. The goal of most (but not all) of these operations is to get rid of the waste material as cheaply as possible and not to make quality compost. This type of compost can also contain garbage (e.g., plastic, nails, and other undesirable “stuff”).

So, when it comes to purchasing bulk compost – let the buyer beware.