



Answers to Common Garden Questions

by Dorothy Downing, UC Master Gardener

Q. How do I know when I need to re-pot my plants?

A. Plants leave clues when it's time to repot them or change out their potting soil. Watch for these common signs. You find yourself watering more and more and your plant is still in perpetual wilt. You see roots growing through the surface of the soil or out the bottom of the pot. When you ease the plant out of the pot there are large roots circling the outer circumference of the rootball. The plant is breaking its pot. The leaf edges are turning brown. The center of the plant is turning brown and/or dying. The plant is just too big for its pot (it's losing its balance), or too big for the space in which you want to keep it. You can't remember the last time you repotted. For most plants, the best time to repot is late winter/early spring when the days are starting to get longer, triggering new growth in your plant's roots and leaves.

Q. What's the difference between mulch and amendment?

A. The biggest difference is how "the material" is used. An amendment is incorporated into the soil as a soil conditioner used to improve a soil's texture, boost its nutrient content and make the soil more water retentive. An amendment is incorporated into the soil through digging or rototilling. Examples of amendments include compost, gypsum, lime, humus, etc. Mulching is the practice of applying organic or inorganic materials on the surface of the soil around the plants. Mulches help hold the moisture in the soil, and they help insulate it from extreme or rapid changes of temperature. They help prevent weed seedlings from becoming established, help prevent erosion and water runoff, and make your garden beds look tidy. The garden bed should be weed free before applying mulches. Organic mulches can break down over time and enrich the soil. Examples of organic mulches include straw, shredded bark and leaves, compost, and pine needles. Inorganic mulches include stones, pot chards, and recycled rubber products. These do not break down over time nor do they improve the soil. Some materials can be amendments and mulches, such as compost. It just depends on how they are used.

Q. How can I arrange my plants to get the best WOW factor in my garden?

A. For spectacular blooming moments in your garden consider the rule of trio plantings. Three plants make special corners and borders to produce eye-pleasing harmony. Choose three plants that bloom during a particular season; then select one of each height—tall, medium and short. Plant the tall plant at the back of the border, the medium one in the middle and the short one at the front. Things to consider when choosing plants and site placement are

complimentary or contrasting colors; leaf texture, water and light needs, and soil requirements.

Q. There is lots of information available about growing bird and butterfly gardens. I am very concerned about our dwindling bee population. What can I plant that will attract bees?

A. Every garden needs pollinators, and without bees there would be limited flowers and even fewer vegetables. Bees are basically looking for two things when they visit your plants: nectar, which is the bee's main source of energy, and pollen, which provides the balanced diet of proteins and fats. To help bees and other pollinator insects—like butterflies—you should provide a range of plants that will offer a succession of flowers, and thus pollen and nectar, through the whole growing season. Native plants are usually best for native bees, and can be used in both wild areas and gardens. There are also many garden plants—particularly older, heirloom varieties of perennials and herbs—that are good sources of nectar or pollen. Together with native plants, these will make a garden attractive to both pollinators and people. There are distinct groups of bees in the spring and summer; and some kinds of bees can be found in both seasons. One of the best guides I have found to choosing plants for your bee garden is Urban Bee Gardens located at <http://nature.berkeley.edu/urbanbeegardens>.



Compost can be a soil amendment or organic mulch, depending on how it is applied to soil.

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