Fall Soil Maintenance for Next Season’s Success

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As autumn approaches, the garden starts nodding off. The zucchinis are all harvested, the last of the beans are drying up on the vine, the summer-blooming annuals are long past their peak, and we hold out just a bit longer before finally yanking out the tomatoes. Soon, we must face the task of putting our beds to bed. But what does that mean exactly?

We all know that great plants start with cultivating great soil. And the key to building soil tilth is to add organic matter. This is sometimes done in the spring, when we turn compost, manure, or cover crops into the soil. There are drawbacks to working the ground that time of year. Tilling wet soil (as of course it is in our Portland springs) is not only hard on the back, but can potentially damage the soil structure, leading to soil compaction, which can cause stunted plants. A better strategy is to add a maintenance layer of compost right on top of the soil in the fall.

After removing annual plants and veggies and cutting back herbaceous perennials, add a 1-3” layer of finished compost or manure directly on top of the ground. If there are evergreen perennials, shrubs, or trees, avoid covering the root zone or mulching against the trunk. No need to dig! The compost will work its way into the soil throughout the winter, helping to create a nice loamy texture, and add important micronutrients, beneficial fungi, and bacteria into the soil food web.

It’s also a good idea to add greensand, rock phosphate, bone meal, or any dry organic amendments at this time. They will slowly break down and provide nutrients just in time for spring planting. Fall is also the perfect time to add lime to vegetable beds and lawns. Our soils tend to be a bit acidic, so a yearly dose of lime helps raise the pH.

Mulching with bark, straw, leaves, or other materials can also be done in the fall. Mulch can help insulate tender plants. Covering the soil also helps reduce compaction due to rainfall, and helps keep weeds at bay. Remember, though, that plant-based mulches hold in moisture, so avoid covering plants that need good drainage with these sorts of materials. You can mulch around drainage-sensitive plants with pumice or gravel instead. If there is still a thick layer of leaves or other mulches that haven’t decomposed by springtime, simply rake up the material. The soil will warm up faster in the spring if it is bare.

When cleaning up dead plants or fallen leaves, remember to remove and discard into your yard debris bin any plants that had mildew, black spot, insect infestations, or other pests or diseases. These problems can live in the soil from year to year if infected parts are left to rot on the ground or in the home compost pile.

Happy autumn!