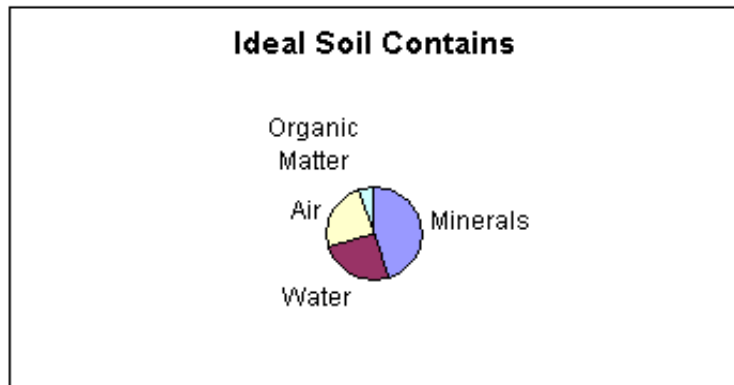


## Organic matter and compost



The percentage of organic matter in a soil sample is determined only if requested.

Organic matter in soils can improve nutrient and moisture retention, drainage, and aeration. It can also help prevent compaction. What level is appropriate will depend on the other characteristics of your soil and the crop you plan to grow. Values

between 7% and 10% are generally acceptable. Values less than 5% are far more common.

Building organic matter to an acceptable level is best accomplished prior to planting.

Organic matter can be raised by green manure crops and by incorporating crop residue, leaves and grass clippings, straw, animal manures, compost, peat and other similar materials.

**Compost Really Works!** By Dan Hill, Michigan Master Gardener (Dan wrote this article for the Monroe Evening News where it was published in 1999)

Did you ever wonder how television and magazine gardeners get those fabulous looking gardens? Well, I found one common item they all use; it's Compost, often called black gold for a good reason. This organic material made from decayed plant material can improve the soil for flowerbeds, vegetable gardens, trees and shrubs.

Why is compost so good for plants? (This is straight from my Master Gardener Class!) First you must understand the five basic requirements all plants must have, Light, Water, Air, Temperature, and Nutrients. Compost will help provide plants with four of the five. Water- Compost will help clay soils drain properly, and sandy soils retain water. Air- All plant root systems need air. Compost will keep the soil loose and free from compaction. Temperature- Most plants prefer warm soils. Compost's dark color and good drainage characteristics allow the sun to warm the soil earlier in spring. Nutrients- Some of fertilizers added to gardens can be

lost to ground leaching and volatilization into the air. Compost has the ability to grab and hold on to these nutrients until the plant can use them.

Compost, mixed into the soil, can improve the performance of any garden. After learning more about what my soil needed, I couldn't wait to make enough of my own compost, so I purchased quantities of it and mixed it into my clay soil. Compost has drastically improved my vegetable garden this year. This is the first year my plants look like the pictures on the seed packets. My garden is so productive now, I don't even care about killing the pests; there's plenty of food for all of us!

The other great thing about compost is that you can make it yourself. Your County Extension Service has lots of information on various types of composting systems, and there is undoubtedly one that will fit your gardening needs. There are small and large systems, slow and easy ones as well as highly productive ones, and you will be surprised to learn how many waste products can be recycled this way!