

Q I was just too busy this fall to add any compost or manure to my garden. Can I still add it this spring?

- Glacier County

A Overall, fall is the best time to add amendments like compost and manure. This allows them time to finish breaking down into organic matter, and nutrients are more available when plants are actively growing in spring. However, it is still better to add them in spring than not add them at all.

There are two precautions for adding amendments in the spring. First, you may need to add extra nitrogen to the garden. Compost and manure may not be fully broken down and there may be a fair amount of carbon remaining. The microbes that break down the carbon in the compost, making nutrients available, require nitrogen for this process and may “rob” nitrogen from the soil. Keep an eye on your plants and if they seem chlorotic (i.e., green material becoming yellow or white), and add a bit of nitrogen.

Second, be sure the manure you are adding is fully composted and does not contain any herbicide residue. If you use fresh or even aged manure, it may contain weed seeds and/or residue of herbicides used to control weeds. Overall, it is recommended to only add manure-based compost once every seven to 10 years and that it come from a reputable source.



Q Each spring when I get to my garden I have a ton of weeds. I usually till them in, but I think it is causing even more weeds. Can I spray the garden with Roundup this spring before I rototill?

- Cascade County

A This is a good question and one that I get quite often. First, if you have a lot of weeds in your garden in the spring and you rototill, it may increase the weed population. When rototilling, you stir up the weed seed in the soil and may redistribute weed rhizomes throughout the garden.

If you are open to the use of pesticides, spraying the garden with a broad-spectrum herbicide, such as Roundup, is recommended. This will reduce the number of weeds, especially rhizomatous weeds, and lessen the chance of redistributing harder to kill weeds. In most cases, spray the garden, wait a few days, rototill in the debris, then plant. Be sure to read and understand the label and be aware of the time you spray to the time that you seed. Be aware of your safety and the environment around you when spraying.

Spraying will take care of many of the weeds, but not the seed that is stirred up during tilling. Continue hoeing those weeds into the fall and never let them go to seed.

Finally, at the end of the gardening season, be sure to clean up and remove all the debris and then rototill. If you do end-of-the-year clean-up and sanitation in fall, you will have fewer weeds the following year.



Q When and how do I use dormant oils?

- Gallatin County

A Dormant oils, also called mineral oils, are used to manage insects on woody yard and garden plants while they are dormant, generally in winter. These highly-refined oils suffocate insects by blocking air holes they use to breathe. When sprayed in the early spring before bud swelling and bud break, and diluted with water, these oils may be an effective control of many hard-to-kill pests, including aphids, caterpillars that overwinter as eggs, mites that overwinter on the plant, and many scale insects. They are relatively safe to use and have less effect on beneficial insects than many other pesticides. When using dormant oils, always read the label. Be aware that some woody species, including black walnut, Douglas fir, junipers, maples and spruces, are sensitive to dormant oils, so oils should be avoided around them. Do not use dormant oils when temperatures are below freezing, rain is likely, or in combination with other pesticides.



Do you have Master Gardener questions? Send them to: extensionmagazine@montana.edu.

I have little piles of sawdust showing up uninvited in the house, does it mean I have carpenter ants?



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Chances are good you have carpenter ants, though you might not always see obvious signs of damage. Unlike termites, carpenter ants cannot digest or eat wood and leave traces of sawdust behind; they eat honeydew, sweets, and other insects. They require rotting or compromised wood to build their nests. They are the largest ants we have in Montana, reaching one-quarter to one-half inch long (Fig. 1).

The most likely places to find carpenter ant nests are where wood has been wet and weathered, such as rotting wood or siding, under leaking areas, and wooded areas in contact with the soil. It's common in Montana for the ants to get started in basements. Tapping the wood in suspected areas might reveal a nest from ants “rustling.” You can also probe the wood with a tool to look for ant galleries.

Carpenter ants are highly active at night. They move their colonies around frequently to keep the brood at the optimum temperature and often look groggy or disoriented. Carpenter ants (and other ant species) are often found in trees but are either searching for honeydew released from aphids or looking for habitat; they are not the culprits responsible for a particular tree declining.

The key to controlling carpenter ants is to locate and destroy the entire nest, particularly the queen. It is also critical to eliminate the source of moisture found around the house; otherwise, they are likely to re-infest the area.

Although a bit of patience is required, bait stations are a good control option. Baits may take weeks or months to work, as it takes a while to kill the workers and queen in the colony. Additionally, you can spray a band of insecticide around the outside foundation to knock down the worker ants during their travels. You can also apply an insecticidal dust to wall voids and in the boxes that house electrical outlets (both outside and inside), which are a frequent travel route for them. Make sure the insecticide is used according to the label, particularly if applying indoors.

Some tips for prevention include controlling moisture leaks, trimming back vegetation that is touching the house, sealing windows and openings, sealing wood before it is wet, and removing any ant-infested or water-damaged wood from the property. Also, stack firewood away from the house. A few carpenter ants around a home or building isn't always a reason to panic; they might just be looking for food in the house when resources are limited outside. They also are a key resource in the environment, breaking down dead wood in outdoor areas.

For more information, please see the following resource:

Hansen, L. and J. Klotz. 2005. *Carpenter ants of the United States and Canada*. Cornell University Press. 224 p.



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