Following is a link to a survey regarding composting. It would be much appreciated and helpful to us if you would take a moment to complete this survey. Thank you.

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=gzy8GBkjY0YRZ8DtNRByrw_3d_3d

Naturally Fertile

A plant cannot tell the difference between man-made nutrients made from fossil fuel or those released from organic matter in the soil by microbes. However, synthetic fertilizer only provides nutrients and does nothing to increase water-holding capacity, reduce runoff, improve soil structure or any of the other benefits of using an organic soil amendment. Organic compost is the dark brown, crumbly material that remains after microbes have decomposed yard waste, cow manure, food waste or other organic material. It directly and indirectly provides a wide range of essential nutrients, sugars and other complex bio-chemicals that are a rich source of complete nutrition for plants. In a word, it is fertility the way Mother Nature provides.

Soil is composed of minerals and decomposed organic matter. In landscape beds, mulch breaks down and the soil becomes more fertile over time. Take away the organic matter and you have a sterile growing medium poorly suited to growing anything requiring fertile soil. In much of Florida, we have sand which will best support plants adapted to low availability of water and nutrients. It is this ability to thrive in Florida’s sandy soil and climate that makes drought-tolerant native plants a particularly good choice to consider for those unable to improve soil fertility with organic matter.

Where we get in trouble is when we attempt to grow plants in sterile soil that require high fertility conditions to thrive. An example would be Floratam St. Augustine grass. We succeed only by the frequent addition of water and inorganic fertilizer. The long-term consequences of this approach can be seen in the depletion of water supplies and the progressive deterioration of water quality due to fertilizer runoff and accumulation in water bodies.

Fertility enhancement is only one benefit of building up organic matter. Soil organics also store excess nutrients, accelerate breakdown of both thatch and pesticide residues, improve soil structure and reduce incidence and severity of soil-borne lawn grass diseases. Those are a lot of essential functions provided by such an humble material. The lack of a significant level of soil organics costs a lot in the form of higher water bills, stormwater management, frequent fertilization and use of chemicals to control insect pests and disease. And some of these benefits may be unattainable in any other way at any reasonable cost.

If compost is such a miracle material in the landscape, why do so many go without its benefits? It may be that a backyard compost bin is prohibited by deed restriction in your community and even if it weren’t, would it be capable of the volume required for even a small lawn? To apply just ½ inch of compost as a topdressing to an existing lawn would require a whole cubic yard to cover just 650 sq. ft. And with a cubic yard of compost weighing half a ton, do we have the time, energy and stamina to apply it in 95 degree temperatures and near 100% humidity?

Consider this: if someone could deliver quality compost to your home and apply it ½ inch thick all over your lawn for roughly $50 per 1000 sq. ft. (total cost), would you be a willing customer?

A Florida-friendly landscape uses less water, fertilizer and pesticides. You can get there by changing your high-fertility landscape plants to those adapted to grow in sand and which naturally require lower inputs. Or you can naturally improve the soil to enable less frequent watering, fertilizing and pest control.

The writer is the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program Coordinator in Pasco County Cooperative Extension, a position jointly funded by the Southwest Florida Water Management District and Pasco County. He can be reached at 727-847-8177 or e-mailed at C dewey@pascocountyfl.net