



Compost & rock mulch

It is not possible to control all of the problems facing gardeners in the Mojave Desert, but it is possible to ameliorate many of them. Our salty soils can be flushed with large amounts of water to dilute salt levels; a shade cloth awning can protect plants from the scorching sun; irrigation provides the water that we rarely see coming from the sky.

To deal with the lack of fertility and the poor workability of the soil, adding compost can be a great help.

In many ways, compost can be something of a “miracle cure” for our problematic soils. It is made of degraded plant materials, so it contains ample levels of the nutrients essential to good growth. Because of its composition and structure, it can improve both the soil’s drainage and water holding capacity. Adding it to the soil also helps make digging and tilling the garden much easier. Since it is mildly acidic, it slowly lowers the pH to make elements like iron, manganese and zinc more available to plants. Deficiencies of these show up in leaves, where the veins remain green but the tissue in between the veins becomes pale green, even yellow.



*Organic mulch pile at the
Research Center & Demonstration Orchard*

Any new garden really should contain at least 5 percent compost. One way to approximate this is to add at least one shovel of compost for every 19 shovels of soil. When soil is particularly poor or difficult to work, and one does not want to create a raised bed, adding more compost is a good idea.

Many yards have water thrifty landscaping already installed. Even these desert natives and desert-adapted plants benefit from applying compost. Out in wild areas, the small number of animals and plants contribute some fertility to natural soils. This is not usually available to residential and commercial landscapes, and improving their fertility is important.

Adding compost to an existing planting can be a challenge. No one wants to disturb existing plants by moving rock mulch, digging around trees or shrubs, damaging root systems. Is this an insoluble problem? Happily, it is not.

Compost is easy to work with, even when the garden is covered with rock mulch.

Consider applying compost, not with a shovel, but as thick slurry. Place several cups of compost into a bucket. Add enough water that it can be stirred without too much difficulty. Make sure to

stir well. Do not let this mixture sit for more than an hour or so; it can quickly become anaerobic and smelly.

Pour the slurry on top of the rock mulch, near the plants you wish to fertilize. After that, gently wash the brown remainder off the rocks. This moves the compost into the soil, where it gradually becomes incorporated. The plants receive both nutrition and water, and the gardener has completed both tasks at once.

This is not the same as compost tea, which must brew for more than a day with constant aeration to generate its multiple benefits. This method is simply adding compost and benefiting the landscape.

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