

Organic soil amendments.

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A soil **amendment** is different from a **fertilizer**. Amendments, well, they amend, they change, they correct things – for the better. One can argue that fertilizers change things for the better – but in the sense of actually changing the soil quality itself – I don't think fertilizers act that way. Fertilizers' primary "job" is to add nutrients to the system that will be taken up by the plant whereas an amendment's job is to alter the physical, biological, chemical, or structural nature of soil which in-turn will increase nutrient availability for the crop or plant.

This is why I think of compost as an amendment rather than a fertilizer. I think compost primarily changes soil by adding organic matter, microbial life, and humic acids rather than NPK nutrients. The compost amended soil is a higher quality soil than it was before the amendment. Therefore when a person does add fertilizers, the response may be more amplified than if fertilizing unchanged soil.

There are many books and articles that examine organic soil amendments. There are workshops and conferences devoted to the topic but in my opinion they get amendments confused with fertilizers. They also confuse "organic" with "carbon based". In my experience, there are very few really worthwhile soil amendments, especially commercially available, decent priced, and that get you repeatable results.

Just about any commercial organic grower should make their own amendments rather than buying them. This is actually a key gateway to profitability in organic enterprises.

Humic acids are worthwhile soil amendments, but they are expensive to buy. Make your own by further refining your composting techniques. Adding soil conditioners like peat moss or sawdust is OK, but they need to be from organic approved sources.

In general, you will find true organic soil amendments good, but too expensive to buy for a commercial scale use. Avoid "sexy" products in eye-catching spray bottles. The best way to fix your soil is to harness your own microbial workforce. Compost you make yourself is your best bet. It's not as fun as buying products, but it will make you a true organic soil building farmer.

You will want to check with any company you are thinking of buying product from to make sure that their product is certified organic. Some companies mistakenly (or not) use the term "Organic" in their advertising yet they are not actually organic. Its buyer beware

The bottom line is that you should look for the USDA organic or OMRI certified label on any fertilizers or amendments you plan to use on your organic land. Also acceptable is to look for a statement like this" Product certified by _____ ...the name of the certifying agency such as MOSES, Oregon Tilth, OCIA, or any one of probably 50 certifiers.



Here is a label taken from a website for an “organic product”. Website literature says “organic gardeners know.....” And you can see humic acids and kelp on the label – these are organic ingredients if sourced from an organic vendor, but they might not be certified organic. Find a label and examine it closely and ask a certifier if you have questions about the product. Do not trust the salespeople – they really just don’t know better and they naively claim the product is organic.

Another example of a not-truly-organic amendment is Milorganite. This one even has “organic” built into its name. And I believe they say “organic” on the bag. It is really bio-digested sewer solids from the water from the Milwaukee metropolitan sewage district. The issue here is that sewage sludge may contain trace heavy metals. Here is the website advertising for the soil amendment Milorganite. It is not certified organic. You cannot use this on organic farms or gardens. It is a cool, eco-friendly, recycled product as they claim, but still, it’s not organic.



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