

## Don't, Don't, and Don't

Written by Jeff Shimonski, BT Contributor  
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### Three great rules for maintaining a healthy yard



y landscape isn't what the typical trendy high-end garden looks like for all these "white boxes" that are metastasizing throughout our older neighborhoods.

At my place, there's no artificial turf installed. We don't have those three requisite palms, and a couple of native tree hedges jammed into a corner to make up some of the mitigation requirements for the older trees that were cut down so the house and pool could take all the available space.

I have no grass to cut so the lawn guys don't have to run their blowers to send my leaf litter down the street to the closest storm drain. I actually retain most of the leaf litter the palms and trees drop on my landscape. I let it lie where it falls or -- in the case of fallen palm fronds -- I stack them in piles that I let decompose. This has created a nice organic layer of topsoil, perfect for growing palms and papayas.

The organic layer is also uncompacted, which means tree and plant roots grow deeper. My papaya plants, one over 20 feet tall, withstood Hurricane Irma. They're still producing fruit.

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It's a shame when I see people removing leaf litter from their property and sending it out with the garbage. It's a great resource.

What's even more of a shame is when the maintenance folks dump a pile or two of "black dirt" to spread around on the property. I hear this is supposed to provide nutrition to the plants. Let's see, you spent hundreds, maybe thousands of dollars trucking soil to your property, another few hundred or thousand dollars spreading it around with a front-end loader that's compacting the ground so you'll have poor drainage and the roots will have a difficult time growing -- and you'll watch as, over the next year, all of that organic matter oxidizes and disappears into thin air?

What did you accomplish, other than throwing away thousands of dollars?

Throwing a thin layer of black dirt on top of the ground or your lawn accomplishes nothing other than raising the per-caps of the landscape maintenance company.

Throwing "black dirt" into the holes surrounding the root balls of newly planted trees doesn't accomplish anything and is also a waste of money. The new plant or tree roots will eventually need to grow into the surrounding soil. So make the surrounding soil uncompacted and more hospitable to the plant roots.

We need to start retaining the organic material that our landscaping produces on our property. The organisms that decompose the leaf litter actually provide a steady pulse of nutrients for your plants. The organic matter provides a substrate for the beneficial fungi that will provide moisture and nutrients to your plants.

As you create a layer of organic matter in the top few inches of soil that we have here in south Florida, you will need to irrigate less often. Organic matter retains moisture, and this is significant for the health of your plants. They'll have less drought stress, which is the initial cause of many insect problems that affect our lawns, shrubs, trees, and palms. Besides, you'll have lower water bills.

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The accompanying photo is the dog poop mushroom, or *Pisolithus tinctorius*, one of the fungi that are beneficial symbionts of our plants and trees. It has nothing to do with dogs or poop; it's so named because it looks like dog poop to some of us. When it first emerges, it's brown, smooth, and shiny. As it weathers, it begins to break down and become lumpy. It pops up in my landscape regularly. I also see it on older home sites where the soil isn't compacted and there's some organic matter in the soil profile.

Seeing the different beneficial mushrooms in landscapes is a good sign of soil health. Normally, the soil isn't compacted, which results in good drainage -- so less run-off, roots grow deeper. Trees are better able to withstand high winds, roots have more and better access to nutrients and available soil moisture.

I always encourage architects and landscape architects to save the native soil on a property about to be demolished. This is the topsoil and added fill that should be around and in the planting beds of the new landscape. This soil normally has excellent drainage and a good organic component, with the accompanying micro-organisms and fungi that the new landscape needs. The soil profile and its resident microorganisms evolved over many years.

Don't throw it away and waste a good resource.

Don't purchase "black dirt" and fancy soil additives.

And don't waste your money fertilizing newly installed landscape plants and trees.

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