

Compost & Soil Amendments FAQ

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Does PCC have a standard for the soil amendments and compost it sells?

Yes, PCC has set a standard for all compost, potting soils, fertilizers, and other soil amendments. Because of the lack of regulations concerning compost and soil amendments, there is a scarcity of products that meet consumer expectations on contamination and environmental impacts. That means consumers could purchase products to use on their home food gardens that contain heavy metals, sewage sludge, pesticide residues, and other contaminants without realizing it. PCC is committed to selling soil amendments that have been approved for use in organic agriculture and avoiding as many of these potential contaminants as possible. To accomplish this, PCC requires that our compost and soil amendments be certified for use in organic agriculture. To learn more about what PCC will allow on our shelves, see the [Compost and Soil Amendment Standard](#).

What does “organic” mean on compost and soil amendments?

The US Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) National Organic Program (NOP) does not certify and regulate the use of the term “organic” for commercial fertilizer and soil amendments. On these products, a label declaring “organic” means only that the product is carbon-based. (“100 percent natural” means only that it is not synthetic.) The NOP, however, does set standards for what soil and compost amendments can be used in organic production. Any product that is truly approved for use in organic food production by an accredited third-party certification will have a statement on the packaging to that effect. Look for a logo of an approved certifier on the product, such as OMRI Listed, CDFA, or WSDA.

I’m familiar with Cedar Grove. Are their products approved for organic?

Yes, Cedar Grove’s compost and soil is approved by OMRI for use in organic food production. However, you should always double check the physical packaging of the product you intend to buy to verify that it has the correct logo confirming its status as approved for organic use.

What’s the difference between synthetic and natural fertilizers?

The term “fertilizer” refers to chemical substances added to the soil or land to increase fertility and supply essential nutrients for plant growth. Most commercial fertilizers will always have nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium; these are three nutrients that are key for plant growth and health. Synthetic fertilizers are human-made combinations of chemical nutrients, and they are fast acting and water-soluble, providing nutrients to the plants directly and immediately. Natural or organic fertilizers, on the other hand, are animal, plant, or mineral substances with naturally high quantities of the desired nutrients. When applied to the soil, they break down and slowly release those nutrients. For example, bone meal is a common natural fertilizer that contains high quantities of phosphorus and calcium.

What are the concerns with chemical or synthetic fertilizers?

While technically all soil amendments are comprised of chemicals, the term “chemical” or “synthetic” are used to refer to fertilizers that are not derived from a naturally occurring source of the chemicals. For instance, bone meal is a finely ground powder from animal bones (usually a byproduct of slaughterhouses) and it’s a naturally rich source of calcium. Kaolinite clay or ash from burned wood are natural sources of potassium. Synthetic fertilizers release quicker and can easily result in over-fertilization.ⁱ

I’ve read peat bogs are threatened ecosystems, why does PCC sell compost and potting soils that contain peat moss?

Peat moss has been a common additive in composts and soil amendments because it makes the soil acidic and does not decompose readily, so one application can last several years. It also holds moisture and nutrients incredibly well, making it a great material for starting seeds. Lastly, it is sterile and doesn’t contain weed seeds, so it can help minimize disease in soils.

Peat moss is harvested from peat bogs, which form over very long periods of time and create an anaerobic environment in which organic material partially decomposes but stays preserved almost indefinitely. Most of the peat moss used in the United States comes from bogs in Canada. When plants decompose, they usually release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, but in peat bogs, that carbon remains in the bog, which makes them great at storing carbon. When the bogs are drained to harvest peat moss, all the carbon dioxide is released into the atmosphere, contributing to climate change.ⁱⁱ

Unfortunately, alternative additives that serve a similar purpose, such as perlite or coconut coir, also have negative ecological and climate change impacts. For all these ecologically sensitive materials, PCC continues to evaluate and monitor the current science and available products to ensure we stay informed regarding best practices and options. Where the inclusion of ecologically sensitive materials offers competing benefits and negative impacts, PCC seeks to provide multiple offerings to allow our shoppers and members a choice and help us to determine future standards.

ⁱ Joe Wertz, “The Contaminants We Can’t Live Without,” *Grist* (blog), January 22, 2020, <https://grist.org/food/fertilizer-is-a-major-pollutant-why-doesnt-the-government-regulate-it-as-one/>.

ⁱⁱ Craig Sams, “Gardeners Should End Their Love Affair with Peat,” *The Guardian*, April 5, 2012, sec. Environment, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/green-living-blog/2012/apr/05/gardeners-peat-carbon>.