Soil Amendment Rebate FAQs

Which soil improvements are eligible and how much money can I receive?
Property owners are eligible for a rebate of 75% of the cost (up to $200) for purchasing soil to improve the water-holding capacity of their lawn or garden. Lawns and gardens with high quality soil, mulch, or compost use water more efficiently, thereby reducing water use. The rebate will be applied to the cost of the material only and does not apply toward delivery, labour or taxes paid on receipts submitted.

Soil improvements must be completed on garden/lawn areas of at least 37 m^2 (400 ft^2). Added top soil/mulch/compost must be at a minimum 50 mm (2") in depth for garden beds and 6 mm (¼") in depth for lawn top dressing.

Applicants must be registered owners of properties connected to the Comox Valley Water System which includes most homes within the City of Courtenay, Town of Comox, and CVRD Water Local Service Areas such as Arden, Comox Valley, England Road, Marsden/Camco, Greaves Crescent and Sandwick. **NOTE:** Properties serviced by private wells or utilities, improvement districts (e.g. Ships Point), the Village of Cumberland as well as the Union Bay, Royston and Black Creek/Oyster Bay Water Local Service Areas **DO NOT QUALIFY** as they are not fed by the Comox Valley Water System. The program is funded only by those connected to the Comox Valley Water System.

Eligible residents are entitled to one-time rebate per property for purchasing soil, mulch, or compost to improve an existing lawn or garden(s). All documentation must be submitted within the calendar year that the work was done. The CVRD may complete a site inspection following installation to confirm that the soil improvement complies with the rebate program if documentation is not sufficient.

A limited number of rebates are available. New applications will be processed on a first-come, first-served basis while funding lasts.

What should my photos include?
The rebate application must include "before" and "after" photos of the soil improvement area. All photos should have an indication of scale (i.e. a person, landscape tie, meter stick, etc.). Pictures must include all upgrades completed as part of this rebate, clearly showing the same yard area depicted in the "before" photos.

Can I apply to the rebate to help with the installation of a new landscape (i.e. as part of a new build)?
No, this program provides support for homeowners to improve the efficiency of existing residential landscapes only. Garden beds and lawns must already be in place to be eligible for the soil rebate. Applicants must be retrofitting or upgrading a pre-existing automated irrigation system that possesses a control timer, irrigation lines, and conventional sprinklers, such as pop-ups and rotors, to be eligible for the irrigation rebate program. However, it is recommended that new landscapes be designed and installed with water efficiency in mind, by utilizing efficient irrigation options, ensuring an adequate base of quality soil and mulch, and choosing low-water use or drought tolerant plant species.

Does the rebate apply to strata properties?
Yes, the rebate applies to **residential** strata properties. Individual home owners within a strata can apply for the rebate when applying soil amendment within their property boundary and a strata corporation can apply for the rebate when applying soil amendment to common areas of the property.

Why is CVRD offering a rebate program for improving the water efficiency of established landscapes?
During the summer months, water use in the Comox Valley water system doubles and sometimes triples! Most of this increase in use is due to our outdoor water demand, primarily to keep landscapes green and fragrant during the dry season. Meanwhile, longer, drier summers and lighter snow packs mean longer watering seasons and less precipitation and snow melt to recharge aquifers and reservoirs during the summer months. In addition to CVRD's watering restrictions, the Comox Valley Water System Water Efficiency Plan – 2021 recommends that "a new supplemental garden improvements rebate program be developed to reduce water use" (Comox Valley Water System Water Efficiency Plan, page 14).

Amending the soil to improve the soil structure and water retention capabilities and adding organic mulch to the top of garden beds to regulate temperature and reduce evaporation, are important and effective measures to reduce summertime water consumption.

What are the benefits of amending my soil with quality compost, soil and organic mulch?

There is nothing more important to the success of a garden than healthy soil! The combination of minerals, soil organisms, and organic matter (compost) - or 'growing medium', as the combination is called in the landscape trade - will determine almost entirely the performance of plants in terms of survival, health, growth rate, and water needs. Nurturing healthy soil can double the rate of plant survival and growth, and cut landscape water needs by 50%. In part, this is because healthy soil acts like a sponge, holding water and nutrients in the root zone of plants. Furthermore, healthy, absorbent soil is a key part of property storm water management, as it increases your landscape's ability to retain water from large rainfall events. And yet, good quality soil is often one of the first things to be sacrificed to save money in landscape design and maintenance.

The addition of mulch can reduce water lost from soil through evaporation. It protects your investment in cultivating quality soil, by reducing evaporation, leaching, and erosion. Mulch also reduces weed growth and adds a finished look to a garden while providing nutrients to plants.
Together, healthy soil and organic mulch maximize the water-retaining potential of our landscapes, allowing us to maintain a healthy garden with less water.

What is the difference between compost, soil and mulch?

Compost is decomposed organic matter; it is effective in improving soil quality by providing nutrients, reducing erosion, and retaining moisture.

Topsoil is the upper layer of soil, usually the top couple of inches, where there is a high concentration of organic matter. Topsoil is often where we see earthworms living, and there is high biological activity in healthy topsoil.

Mulch is a layer of material that is applied to soil surface to reduce weed growth, regulate soil temperature and conserve soil moisture. Examples include woody mulches like bark mulch, and organic mulched like grass clippings, leaves, or straw.

Peat Moss is a partially decayed form of sphagnum moss from bogs; it is excellent for aerating and creating pore space but lacks nutrients and biological diversity that compost provides.

Sand is an inorganic granular material, made of fine particles of rock and minerals. Sand provides no nutrients and has no ability to hold moisture; rather it is very fast draining.

Where do I purchase quality topsoil, compost and mulch?
In the Comox Valley there are a number of commercial operations that sell high quality compost and mulch, and can be located through a telephone directory or an online search. Nurseries, garden centers, home improvement stores and some landscape material suppliers offer a wide selection of topsoil, compost, and mulch products by the bag or in bulk. Many companies also offer delivery options. Sustainably harvested amendments that are free of weed seeds and do not leach toxins are good for your landscape and the environment. Ensure that all products you use on your landscape are watershed friendly!

How do I ensure I'm choosing quality topsoil, compost and mulch?
It's important to be a savvy consumer when purchasing soil, compost, and mulch. The following tips will help you to choose a quality topsoil, compost, or mulch product.

<u>Soil & Compost:</u>
Optimum amounts of organic matter in a living growing medium produce garden soil or compost blend that:

- feels soft and crumbles easily
- drains well and warms up quickly in spring
- does not crust after planting
- soaks up heavy rains with little runoff
- produces healthy, high quality plants
- stores moisture for drought periods
- has few clods and no hardpan
- resists erosion and nutrient loss
- supports high populations of soil organisms
- has a rich, earthy smell
- does not require fertilization

Growing medium is often a mix of topsoil and organic matter (compost), and sometimes sand.
Common problems to avoid when purchasing soil and compost include:

- Topsoil that is too coarse (no silt or clay) or too dense (no sand).
  A sandy loam is the optimum texture - this is a combination of about 40% inorganics (sand, silt, clay) and about 60% organics (nutrient-rich compost, soil, peat).
- Topsoil that is weed infested. Seeds can lay dormant in topsoil for years.
  Look for a topsoil source that is weed free.

- Compost that is not yet decomposed - livestock manure often has both of these problems. This robs the soil of nitrogen. Decomposition (and weed) problems can be avoided with a proper composting process.

Purchase growing medium from reliable suppliers and contractors who can certify that the products meet the specifications of the BC Landscape Standard and local bylaws.

Mulch:

Once you've amended your gardens with good quality compost and soil, protect your investment by adding mulch on top of the soil. Mulch is simply something that protects the earth. It shades and insulates the soil, preventing against evaporation, regulating temperature, and protecting soil structure. Many plants and trees create their own beneficial mulch in the form of leaf litter and natural shedding which we often remove when we're "tidying up" our gardens. There are many types of mulch available for purchase, of which bark mulch is one type. Some tips for purchasing and applying mulch:

- Look for mulch made up of a mix of fine particles as well as larger, more obvious pieces. Medium coarse mulches are a good option as they allow water through from the surface more readily and prevent soil crusting. In addition, the larger pieces break down more slowly, meaning you need to re-mulch less often (every 3-5 years, instead of every 2 years with fine mulches).
- Bark mulch ranges in texture from fine to medium coarseness, and in color from light (wood chips) to dark (composted bark mulch). Keep in mind many mulches change colour with exposure.
- Wood chips can be a good, inexpensive option, but be sure to inspect the product's quality before purchase. Take a look at the mulch pile, and if the supplier processes it on site, look at the raw product. If you see pieces of metal or nails and screws in and around the pile of mulch, or if there are no bark pieces at all, only a fine brown "mulch", those can be signs that the product is made from a treated waste wood product, rather than leftovers from raw wood processing. Please note, small rocks are not a sign of poor mulch, but commonly found due to the process of loading the material.
- When applying mulch on top of soils, make sure each layer is watered before adding the next. So, if you were applying a layer of fine mulch, followed by a layer of coarser bark mulch around the roots of a shrub, you would:
    1. Water the soil around the shrub's root zone thoroughly.
    2. Apply the fine mulch and water it thoroughly.
    3. Add the coarse mulch on top and water it thoroughly.
- Other mulches include leaf litter, grass clippings, or straw.

- If you are choosing straw mulch for veggie gardens or strawberries, be sure that you are getting straw and not hay. Hay contains a higher concentration of seeds and could cause unwanted weed growth in your garden.

How do I know if I need to amend my soil? How much topsoil and/or mulch should I be adding to my garden?
Dig a test hole in typical areas of your yard. If the depth of good black crumbly soil is less than 150 mm (6") under lawn and 300 mm to 450 mm (12" to 18") for shrubs, you are likely using more water than you should. Rather than starting over with new plantings, it is possible to gradually add to your soil depth by topdressing with thin layers of growing medium and well-composted organic matter.

For grass areas: Topdressing should not exceed 6 mm (1/4") depth at a time. Once grass is established, stop removing the grass clippings from the surface. Mow regularly, and allow the clippings to decay into the soil, where they will recycle the organic matter and nutrients back into the soil organisms and the grass.

For shrub and groundcover areas: The minimum recommended depth per top dress application of topsoil or compost is 50 mm (2"). The maximum depth could be as much as 75 mm (3'').

For on-going maintenance once adequate soil depth is in place, use organic mulches like bark mulch to protect your recent investment in the soil by reducing soil moisture evaporation, minimizing weed germination, and providing a long-term supply of organic matter. Allow leaf drop to remain - this builds up a 'natural duff' like in the forest, building the soil, soil life, and recycling nutrients. Apply mulches at a minimum thickness of 50 mm to 75 mm (2" to 3"). Inspect depth seasonally and add as required to maintain minimum depth.

Approximately 6 mm (1/4") for lawn areas, and 50 mm (2") for garden beds is the required depth of soil amendment to be eligible for the rebate program. In addition, applicants must be top dressing at least 37 m^2 (400 ft^2) of landscape area.

How do I figure out how much top oil or mulch to buy for my yard/garden area?

Search online for a topsoil or mulch calculator like this one to help you calculate the amount of soil or mulch needed to cover your target landscape area to the desired depth. A helpful guide is that one yard of soil will cover approximately 320 ft² to a depth of one inch. Here is a brief summary table that outlines approximate volumes of soil required for different sized garden areas.

Note: *Garden area is calculated by multiplying garden length by width (e.g. 10 m x 5 m = 50 m²) or (e.g. 10 ft x 5 ft = 500 ft²)*

SOIL AMENDMENT REFERENCE TABLE - PURCHASING GUIDE TO SOIL, MULCH, OR COMPOST AMOUNT REQUIRED BY APPLICATION AREA & DEPTH		
Application area (size of lawn or garden)	Recommended Depth of Soil*	
	2 inches or ~50 mm (for garden beds)	1/4 inch or ~6 mm (for topdressing lawn)
	amount of soil/compost required	
400 sq ft (37 sq metres)	2.4 cubic yards 67 x 28L bag	0.32 cubic yards 10 x 28L bags
500 sq ft (46 sq metres)	3 cubic yards 84 x 28L bags	0.4 cubic yards 12 x 28L bags
750 sq ft (70 sq metres)	4.5 cubic yards 126 x 28L bags	0.6 cubic yards 18 x 28L bags
1000 sq ft (92 sq metres)	6 cubic yards 168 x 28L bags	0.8 cubic yards 24 x 28L bags

**Recommended depth refers to the minimum amount of organic material (soil, compost, mulch) added to qualify for this rebate.*