

VIRGINIA DEQ STORMWATER  
DESIGN SPECIFICATION No. 4

# SOIL COMPOST AMENDMENT

VERSION 2.0

July 1, 2013



## SECTION 1: DESCRIPTION

Soil restoration is an Environmental Site Design (ESD) practice applied after construction, to deeply till compacted soils and restore their porosity by amending them with compost. These soil amendments can reduce the generation of runoff from compacted urban lawns and may also be used to enhance the runoff reduction performance of areas that receive runoff, such as downspout disconnections, grass channels, and filter strips (**Table 4.1**).

## SECTION 2: PERFORMANCE

Table 4.1: Stormwater Functions of Soil Compost Amendments <sup>1</sup>

Stormwater Function	HSG Soils A and B		HSG Soils C and D	
	No CA <sup>2</sup>	With CA	No CA	With CA
<b>Annual Runoff Volume Reduction (RR)</b>				
Simple Rooftop Disconnection	50%	NA <sup>3</sup>	25%	50%
Filter Strip	50%	NA <sup>3</sup>	NA <sup>4</sup>	50%
Grass Channel	20%	NA <sup>3</sup>	10%	30%
<b>Total Phosphorus (TP) EMC Reduction<sup>4</sup> by BMP Treatment Practice</b>	0		0	
<b>Total Phosphorus (TP) Mass Load Removal</b>	Same as for RR (above)		Same as for RR (above)	
<b>Total Nitrogen (TN) EMC Reduction by BMP Treatment Practice</b>	0		0	
<b>Total Nitrogen (TN) Mass Load Removal</b>	Same as for RR (above)		Same as for RR (above)	
<b>Channel Protection &amp; Flood Mitigation</b>	<b>Partial.</b> Designers can use the RRM spreadsheet to adjust the curve number for each design storm for the contributing drainage area, based on annual runoff volume reduction achieved.			
<sup>1</sup> CWP and CSN (2008), CWP (2007) <sup>2</sup> CA = Compost Amended Soils, <sup>3</sup> Compost amendments are generally not applicable for A and B soils, although it may be advisable to incorporate them on mass-graded B soils to maintain runoff reduction rates. <sup>4</sup> Filter strips in HSG C and D should use composted amended soils to enhance runoff reduction capabilities. See Stormwater Design Specification No. 2: Sheetflow to Vegetated Filter Strip or Conserved Open Space.				

**Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED®).** The LEED® point credit system designed by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) and implemented by the Green Building Certification Institute (GBCI) awards points related to site design and stormwater management. Several categories of points are potentially available for new development and redevelopment projects. **Chapter 6** of the 2013 *Virginia Stormwater Management Handbook* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) provides a more thorough discussion of the site planning process and design considerations as related to Environmental Site Design and potential LEED credits. However, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) is not affiliated with the USGBC or GBCI and any information on applicable points provided here is based only on basic compatibility. **Designers should research and verify scoring criteria and applicability of points as related to the specific project being considered through USGBC LEED resources.**

Soil amendments can serve to supplement the performance of any open spaces or stormwater BMPs that readily earn LEED® credits. **Designers should research and verify scoring criteria and applicability of points as related to the specific project being considered through USGBC LEED resources.**

### SECTION 3: DESIGN TABLE

Not applicable.

### SECTION 4: TYPICAL DETAILS

Not applicable.

### SECTION 5: PHYSICAL FEASIBILITY & DESIGN APPLICATIONS

Compost amended soils are suitable for any pervious area where soils have been or are expected to be compacted by the grading and construction process. They are particularly well suited when existing soils have low infiltration rates (HSG C and D) and when the pervious area will be used to filter runoff (downspout disconnections and grass channels). The area or strip of amended soils should be hydraulically connected to the stormwater conveyance system. Soil restoration is recommended for sites that will experience mass grading: the removal and stockpiling of existing topsoil (the A horizon) and replacing it on top of the newly graded (and compacted) landscape.

Compost amendments are not recommended where:

- Existing soils have high infiltration rates (e.g., HSG A and B), although compost amendments may be needed at mass-graded B soils in order to maintain runoff reduction rates.
- The water table or bedrock is located within 1.5 feet of the soil surface.
- Slopes exceed 10%.
- Existing soils are saturated or seasonally wet.
- Application would harm roots of existing trees (keep amendments outside the tree drip line).
- The downhill slope runs toward an existing or proposed building foundation.
- The contributing impervious surface area exceeds the surface area of the amended soils.

Compost amendments can be applied to the entire pervious area of a development or be applied only to select areas of the site to enhance the performance of runoff reduction practices. Some common design applications include:

- Reduce runoff from compacted lawns (while also enhancing the long term viability of the turf).
- Increase runoff reduction for rooftop disconnections directed over otherwise poor soils.
- Increase runoff reduction within a grass channel.
- Increase runoff reduction within a vegetated filter strip.
- Increase the runoff reduction function of a tree cluster or reforested area of the site.

### SECTION 6: DESIGN CRITERIA

#### 6.1. Performance When Used in Conjunction With Other Practices

As referenced in several of the other specifications, soil compost amendments can be used to enhance the runoff reduction capabilities of allied practices. The specifications for each of these

practices contain design criteria for how compost amendments can be incorporated into those designs:

- Rooftop (impervious) Disconnection – see Stormwater Design Specification No. 1, Section 3.2.
- Vegetated Filter Strips – see Stormwater Design Specification No. 2, Section 6.1.
- Grass Channels – see Stormwater Design Specification No. 3, Section 6.5.
- Site Reforestation – see Appendix A of this design specification.

## 6.2. Soil Testing

Soil tests are required during two stages of the compost amendment process. The first testing is done to ascertain pre-construction soil properties at proposed amendment areas. The initial testing is used to determine soil properties to a depth 1 foot below the proposed amendment area, with respect to bulk density, pH, salts, and soil nutrients. These tests should be conducted every 5,000 square feet, and are used to characterize potential drainage problems and determine what, if any, further soil amendments are needed.

The second soil test is taken at least one week after the compost has been incorporated into the soils. This soil analysis should be conducted by a reputable laboratory to determine whether any further nutritional requirements, pH adjustment, and organic matter adjustments are necessary for plant growth. This soil analysis should be done in conjunction with the final construction inspection to ensure tilling or subsoiling has achieved design depths.

## 6.3. Runoff Volume Reduction

The runoff volume reduction achieved by soil restoration depends on the site application and the pre-construction hydrologic soil group. When compost amendments are used simply to reduce runoff volume from compacted lawns, the lower runoff coefficients shown in **Table 4.2** can be used to lower the total treatment volume ( $T_v$ ) for the site as a whole or the applicable drainage area. If the soil restoration area accepts runoff from adjacent impervious areas, the higher runoff reduction rates outlined in **Table 4.1** above may be used for the indicated practices.

**Table 4.2. Runoff Coefficients for Use for Different Pervious Areas**

Hydrologic Soil Group	Undisturbed Soils <sup>1</sup>	Disturbed Soils <sup>2</sup>	Restored and Reforested <sup>3</sup>
A	0.02	0.15	0.02
B	0.03	0.20	0.03
C	0.04	0.22	0.04
D	0.05	0.25	0.05

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Portions of a new development site, outside the limits of disturbance, which are not graded and do not receive construction traffic.

<sup>2</sup> Previously developed sites, and any site area inside the limits of disturbance as shown on the E&S Control plan.

<sup>3</sup> Areas with restored soils that are also reforested to achieve a minimum 75% forest canopy

#### 6.4. Determining Depth of Compost Incorporation

The depth of compost amendment is based on the relationship of the surface area of the soil amendment to the contributing area of impervious cover that it receives. **Table 4.3** presents some general guidance derived from soil modeling by Holman-Dodds (2004) that evaluates the required depth to which compost must be incorporated. Some adjustments to the recommended incorporation depth were made to reflect alternative recommendations of Roa Espinosa (2006), Balousek (2003), Chollak and Rosenfeld (1998) and others.

**Table 4.3. Short-Cut Method to Determine Compost and Incorporation Depths**

	Contributing Impervious Cover to Soil Amendment Area Ratio <sup>1</sup>			
	IC/SA = 0 <sup>2</sup>	IC/SA = 0.5	IC/SA = 0.75	IC/SA = 1.0 <sup>3</sup>
Compost (in) <sup>4</sup>	2 to 4 <sup>5</sup>	3 to 6 <sup>5</sup>	4 to 8 <sup>5</sup>	6 to 10 <sup>5</sup>
Incorporation Depth (in)	6 to 10 <sup>5</sup>	8 to 12 <sup>5</sup>	15 to 18 <sup>5</sup>	18 to 24 <sup>5</sup>
Incorporation Method	Rototiller	Tiller	Subsoiler	Subsoiler
<b>Notes:</b> <sup>1</sup> IC = contrib. impervious cover (sq. ft.) and SA = surface area of compost amendment (sq. ft.) <sup>2</sup> For amendment of compacted lawns that do not receive off-site runoff <sup>3</sup> In general, IC/SA ratios greater than 1 should be avoided, unless applied to a simple rooftop disconnection <sup>4</sup> Average depth of compost added <sup>5</sup> Lower end for B soils, higher end for C/D soils				

Once the area and depth of the compost amendments are known, the designer can estimate the total amount of compost needed, using an estimator developed by TCC, (1997):

$$C = A * D * 0.0031$$

Where: C = compost needed (cu. yds.)  
 A = area of soil amended (sq. ft.)  
 D = depth of compost added (in.)

#### 6.5. Compost Specifications

- Compost shall be derived from plant material and meet the general criteria set forth by the U.S. Composting Seal of Testing Assurance (STA) program. See [www.compostingcouncil.org](http://www.compostingcouncil.org) for a list of local providers.
- The compost shall be the result of the biological degradation and transformation of plant-derived materials under conditions that promote anaerobic decomposition. The material shall be well composted, free of viable weed seeds, and stable with regard to oxygen consumption and carbon dioxide generation. The compost shall have a moisture content that has no visible free water or dust produced when handling the material. It shall meet the following criteria, as reported by the U.S. Composting Council STA Compost Technical Data Sheet provided by the vendor:

- a. 100% of the material must pass through a half inch screen
- b. The pH of the material shall be between 5.5 and 8.5.
- c. Manufactured inert material (plastic, concrete, ceramics, metal, etc.) shall be less than 1.0% by weight
- d. The organic matter content shall be >35%
- e. Soluble salt content shall be less than 6.0 mmhos/cm
- f. Must be mature and stable per the appropriate test(s) as specified by STA
- g. Carbon/nitrogen ratio shall be less than 25:1
- h. Must meet USEPA part 503 levels for heavy metals
- i. The compost should have an optimum dry bulk density ranging from 40 to 50 lbs/ft<sup>3</sup>. However, certain fully mature coarse textured composts may be lower.

In general, fresh manure should not be used for compost because of high bacteria and nutrient levels. If manure is used, it must be aged (composted) and meet the criteria listed above.

## **SECTION 7: REGIONAL & SPECIAL CASE DESIGN ADAPTATIONS**

### **7.1. Karst Terrain**

No special adaptations are needed in karst terrain, but the designer should take soil tests to ensure that soil pH is adjusted to conform to pre-existing soil conditions found in limestone dominated areas.

### **7.2. Coastal Plain**

Designers should evaluate drainage and water table elevations to ensure the entire depth of soil amendment will not become saturated (i.e., a minimum separation depth of 2 feet from groundwater). Compost amendments are most cost effective when used to boost the runoff reduction capability of grass vegetated filter strips, grass channels and rooftop disconnections.

### **7.3. Steep Terrain**

Compost amendments are ineffective when longitudinal slopes exceed 5%, so some terracing may be needed on steeper slopes.

### **7.4. Cold Climate and Winter Performance**

Soil restoration is not recommended for areas that will be used for snow storage.

### **7.5. Linear Highway Sites**

Soil amendments can improve the runoff reduction of drainage swales in open section rights-of-way and highway medians.

## SECTION 8: CONSTRUCTION

### 8.1. Construction Sequence

The construction sequence for compost amendments differs depending whether the practice will be applied to a large area or a narrow filter strip, such as in a rooftop disconnection or grass channel. For larger areas, a typical construction sequence is as follows:

**Step 1.** For large areas of soils to be restored (typically with a IC/SA less than 0.5 (**Table 4.3**)): after the area has been cleared of construction activity, the area should be deep tilled to a depth of 2 to 3 feet using a tractor and subsoiler with two deep shanks (curved metal bars) to create rips perpendicular to the direction of flow. This establishes a vertical pathway for the compost to influence microbial activity into the adjacent soil. (This step may be omitted when compost is used for narrower filter strips.)

**Step 2.** Spread the specified compost depth in accordance with **Table 4.3** across the surface and incorporate into the soil using a rototiller, tiller, or subsoiler as specified. It is important to have dry conditions at the site prior to incorporating compost.

**Step 3.** The site should be leveled and seed or sod used to establish a vigorous grass cover. Lime or irrigation may initially be needed to help the grass grow quickly.

**Step 5.** Areas of compost amendments exceeding 2500 square feet should employ simple erosion control measures, such as silt fence, to reduce the potential for erosion and trap sediment.

### 8.2. Construction Inspection

Construction inspection involves digging a test pit to verify the depth of mulch, amended soil and scarification. A rod penetrometer should be used to establish the depth of uncompacted soil at one location per 10,000 square feet.

Upon final inspection and acceptance, log the Soil Compost Amendment practice's GPS coordinates and submit them for entry into the local BMP maintenance tracking database.

## SECTION 9: MAINTENANCE

### 9.1. Maintenance Agreements

The Virginia Stormwater Management regulations (**4 VAC 50-60-112**) specify the circumstances under which a maintenance agreement must be executed between the owner and the VSMP authority, and sets forth inspection requirements, compliance procedures if maintenance is neglected, a requirement to notify the local VSMP authority upon transfer of ownership, and right-of-entry for local program personnel.

The long term maintenance requirements for soil amendments are minor compared with many other BMPs, however, the following items should be addressed as part of a long term maintenance program for amended soils:

- When soil amendments are applied on private residential lots, homeowners should be educated on the long-term performance goal and any routine maintenance needs that will ensure continued performance.
- It shall be the responsibility of the VSMP Authority to identify through the local ordinance what type of maintenance agreement, deed restriction, or other mechanism, if any, shall be required in instances where soil amendments are applied across the graded portions of residential lots as a way to reduce runoff at the site scale.
- Where soil amendments are applied to specific runoff reduction practices, the presence and purpose of the soil amendments must be identified within the required maintenance agreement, maintenance plan, and applicable enforcement mechanism for those practices.
- In all instances, the mechanism should, ideally, grant authority for local agencies to access the property for inspection or corrective action, especially where the application of soil amendments has been credited in lieu of a structural BMP.

In cases of soil restoration associated with more than 10,000 square feet of reforestation, a simple maintenance agreement along with a conservation easement and/or deed restriction, which also identifies a responsible party, may be required to make sure the newly developing forest cannot be cleared or developed and appropriate management is accomplished (i.e., thinning, invasive plant removal, etc.).

Soil compost amendments within a filter strip or grass channel should be located within a dedicated stormwater or drainage easement or in a public right-of-way as required by the specifications for those individual practices.

## 9.2. First Year Maintenance Operations

In order to ensure the success of soil compost amendments, the following tasks must be undertaken in the first year following soil restoration:

***Initial inspections.*** For the first six months following the incorporation of soil amendments, the site should be inspected at least once after each storm event that exceeds 1/2-inch of rainfall.

***Spot Reseeding.*** Inspections should note bare or eroding areas in the contributing drainage area or around the soil restoration area and ensure that they are immediately stabilized with grass cover.

***Fertilization.*** Depending on the findings of a soils test of the amended area, a one-time, spot fertilization may be needed in the fall after the first growing season to increase plant vigor.

***Watering.*** Water once every three days for the first month, and then weekly during the first year (April-October), depending on rainfall.

### 9.3. Ongoing Maintenance

There are no major on-going maintenance needs associated with soil compost amendments, although the owners may want to de-thatch the turf every few years to increase permeability. The owner should also be aware that there are maintenance tasks needed for filter strips, grass channels, and reforestation areas. An example maintenance inspection checklist for an area of Soil Compost Amendments can be accessed in Appendix C of Chapter 9 of the *Virginia Stormwater Management Handbook* (2010).

## SECTION 10. COMMUNITY & ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Not applicable.

## SECTION 11: REFERENCES

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## **APPENDIX 4-A**

# **INITIAL MINIMUM DESIGN CRITERIA FOR REFORESTATION, DISCONNECTION, FILTER STRIPS AND GRASS CHANNELS**

### **SECTION 4-A.1: SITE REFORESTATION**

Several design criteria apply when compost amendments are used to enhance the performance of reforested areas. Site reforestation involves planting trees on existing turf or barren ground at a development site with the explicit goal of establishing a mature forest canopy that will intercept rainfall, increase evapotranspiration rates, and enhance soil infiltration rates. Reforestation areas at larger development sites (and individual trees at smaller development sites) are eligible under the following qualifying conditions.

- The minimum contiguous area of reforestation must be greater than 5,000 square feet.
- A long term vegetation management plan must be prepared and filed with the local review authority in order to maintain the reforestation area in a natural forest condition.
- The reforestation area must be protected by a perpetual stormwater easement or deed restriction which stipulates that no future development or disturbance may occur within the area.
- Reforestation methods must achieve 75% forest canopy within ten years.
- The planting plan must be approved by the appropriate local forestry or conservation authority, including any special site preparation needs.
- The construction contract should contain a care and replacement warranty extending at least 3 growing seasons, to ensure adequate growth and survival of the plant community.
- The reforestation area shall be shown on all construction drawings and E&S Control plans during construction.

### **SECTION 4-A.2: SIMPLE DOWNSPOUT DISCONNECTION**

See VA DCR Stormwater Design Specification No. 1.

### **SECTION 4-A.3: FILTER STRIP**

See VA DCR Stormwater Design Specification No. 2.

### **SECTION 4-A.4: GRASS CHANNEL**

See VA DCR Stormwater Design Specification No. 3.