



AGRI MAGAZINE

(International E-Magazine for Agricultural Articles)

Volume: 03, Issue: 04 (April, 2026)

Available online at <http://www.agrimagazine.in>

© Agri Magazine, ISSN: 3048-8656

Organic Matter Management: The Foundation of a Sustainable Farming System

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Soil organic matter (SOM) is essential for maintaining soil health, fertility, and sustainability. It improves soil structure, water retention, nutrient availability, and supports microbial activity. However, modern farming has reduced SOM levels. Practices like cover cropping, composting, reduced tillage, crop rotation, and biochar application help restore SOM, enhancing productivity, environmental sustainability, and long-term food security.

Introduction- Why Organic Matter Matters

Soil is much more than just dirt beneath our feet—it is a living system that supports plant growth, stores water, and cycles nutrients. At the heart of this system lies soil organic matter (SOM), a mixture of plant residues, animal remains, microbes, and decomposed materials. Even though organic matter usually makes up only 1–6% of soil, it has a huge impact on soil health. It improves fertility, supports plant growth, and helps protect the environment. Unfortunately, modern farming practices like excessive tillage, monocropping, and burning crop residues have reduced organic matter levels worldwide. In fact, many agricultural soils have lost **50–70% of their original organic carbon**.

This loss has serious consequences:

- Reduced soil fertility
- Poor water retention
- Increased erosion
- Contribution to climate change through greenhouse gas emissions

Today, scientists and farmers are realizing that restoring organic matter is essential for sustainable agriculture and food security, especially as the global population continues to grow.

What Makes Organic Matter So Important?

Organic matter performs several vital functions that make soil productive and resilient.

1. Improves Soil Structure

Organic matter acts like a glue, binding soil particles together into stable aggregates. This improves:

- Soil aeration
- Water infiltration
- Resistance to erosion

Well-structured soils allow roots to grow easily and absorb nutrients efficiently.

2. Enhances Water Holding Capacity

Organic matter can hold up to six times its weight in water. This is especially important in drought-prone regions, where it helps crops survive dry periods.

3. Supplies Essential Nutrients

Organic matter is a natural source of nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus, and sulfur. Through microbial activity, these nutrients are slowly released in forms plants can use, ensuring a steady supply throughout the growing season.

4. Supports Soil Life

Healthy soils are full of life—bacteria, fungi, earthworms, and other organisms. Organic matter provides food and energy for these organisms, which in turn:

- Break down residues
- Improve soil structure
- Suppress plant diseases

5. Helps Fight Climate Change

Soils can store large amounts of carbon. By increasing organic matter, farmers can capture carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, helping reduce global warming.

How Organic Matter Forms and Changes

Organic matter is constantly being broken down and rebuilt through a process called **decomposition**.

Microorganisms such as bacteria and fungi play a key role. They break down plant residues into simpler substances, releasing nutrients and forming stable organic compounds.

Several factors influence this process:

- **Temperature:** Warmer conditions speed up decomposition
- **Moisture:** Adequate water supports microbial activity
- **Soil type:** Clay soils protect organic matter better than sandy soils
- **Quality of residues:** Materials with low carbon-to-nitrogen ratio decompose faster

Understanding these factors helps farmers manage organic matter more effectively.

Practical Ways to Build Organic Matter

Improving soil organic matter is not a one-time task—it is a continuous process that requires smart and sustainable farming practices. Farmers across the world are adopting simple yet effective techniques to enrich their soils, increase productivity, and ensure long-term sustainability. The following practices are among the most reliable ways to build and maintain soil organic matter.

1. Cover Cropping

Cover cropping involves growing specific crops such as legumes (clover, beans), grasses (rye, oats), or mixed species during the off-season when the main crop is not grown. These crops are not primarily grown for harvest but for improving soil health.

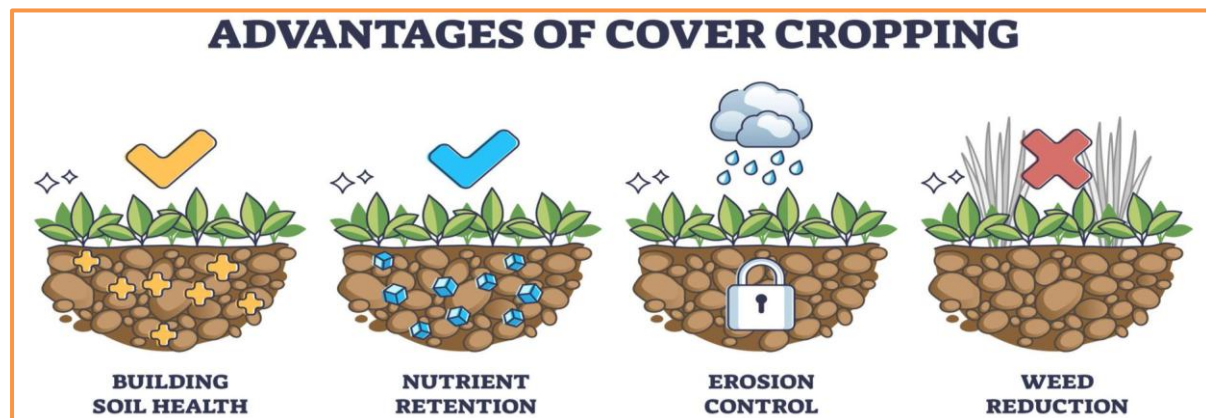


Figure 1: Advantages of cover cropping illustration

Benefits:

- Adds large amounts of organic biomass to the soil when incorporated or left as mulch
- Protects soil from erosion caused by wind and water
- Improves soil structure through root growth and organic matter addition
- Enhances soil fertility, especially when legumes fix atmospheric nitrogen
- Suppresses weeds and reduces the need for herbicides

Over time, cover cropping increases soil carbon levels and creates a more resilient farming system.

2. Compost and Manure Application

Applying compost and animal manure is one of the oldest and most effective methods of maintaining soil fertility. Compost is produced by decomposing organic waste materials such as crop residues, kitchen waste, and animal dung under controlled conditions.

Benefits:

- Supplies essential nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium
- Improves soil structure, making it loose and well-aerated
- Enhances microbial activity, which is crucial for nutrient cycling
- Increases water-holding capacity of the soil
- Reduces dependence on chemical fertilizers

Vermicompost (prepared using earthworms) is especially rich in nutrients and beneficial microbes, making it highly effective for crop growth.

3. Reduced or No Tillage

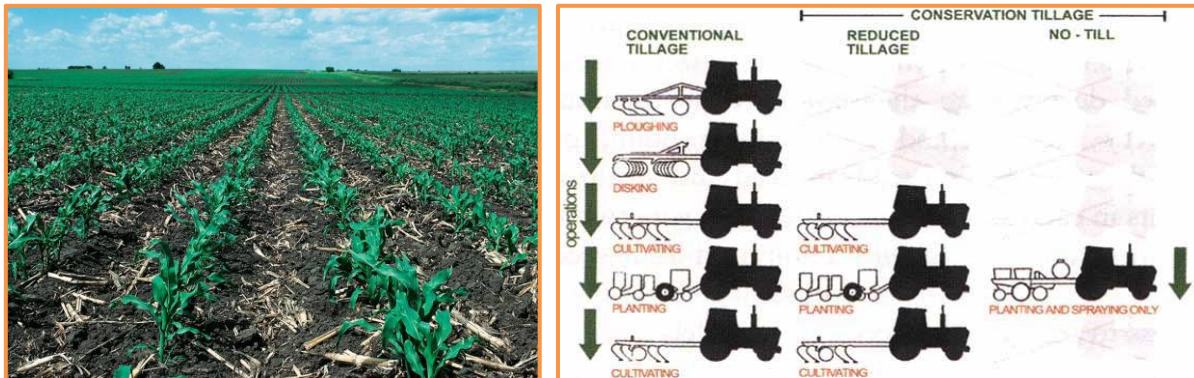


Figure 2: Showing field with no tillage(left), illustration showing no of ploughs used in no tillage(left).

Traditional plowing disturbs the soil and exposes organic matter to rapid decomposition. Reduced tillage or no-till farming minimizes soil disturbance and helps preserve soil structure.

Benefits:

- Protects soil organic matter from rapid breakdown
- Maintains soil aggregates and improves stability
- Reduces soil erosion and compaction
- Conserves soil moisture
- Promotes the growth of beneficial organisms like earthworms and microbes

Although it may require adjustments in weed and pest management, conservation tillage is highly effective for long-term soil health.

4. Crop Rotation

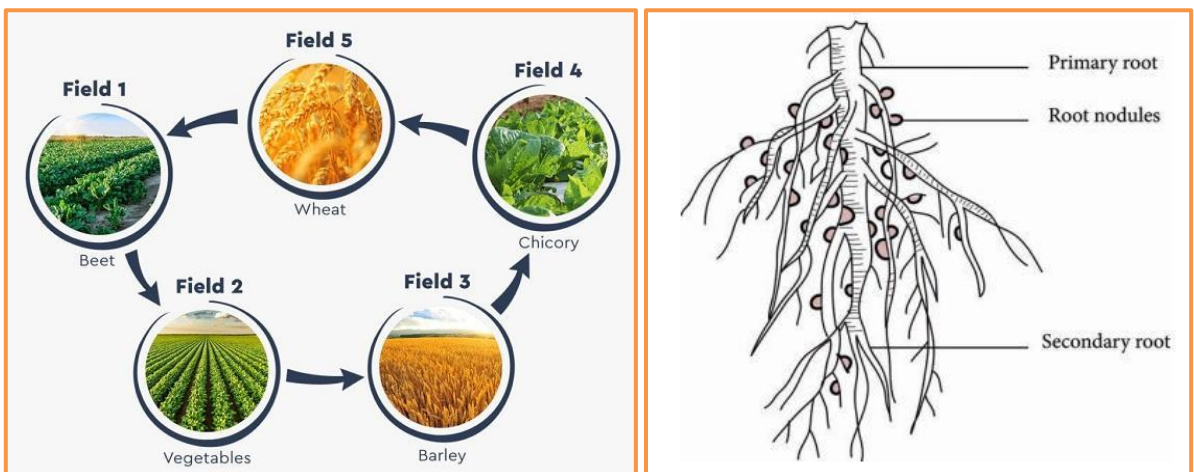


Figure 3: Showing pattern of crop rotation(left), Root system of legumes(right)

Crop rotation means growing different types of crops in a planned sequence over time instead of cultivating the same crop repeatedly.

Benefits:

- Improves soil biodiversity by supporting different microorganisms
- Breaks pest and disease cycles, reducing crop losses
- Enhances nutrient availability, especially when legumes are included
- Provides varied organic residues that enrich soil organic matter

For example, rotating cereals with legumes can naturally improve nitrogen levels in the soil and reduce fertilizer requirements.

5. Biochar Application

Biochar is a charcoal-like substance produced by heating organic materials in a low-oxygen environment (a process called pyrolysis). It is highly stable and remains in the soil for hundreds of years.

Benefits:

- Improves soil water retention due to its porous structure.
- Enhances nutrient holding capacity, reducing nutrient loss
- Provides habitat for beneficial microorganisms
- Helps in long-term carbon storage, reducing atmospheric CO₂

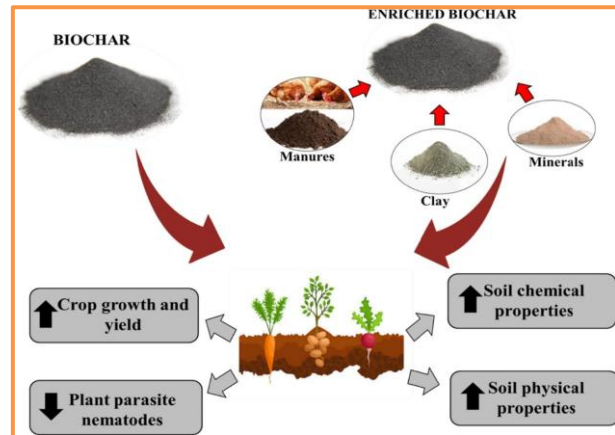


Figure 4: Applications of biochar

Biochar is particularly useful in degraded or nutrient-poor soils, where it can significantly improve soil quality and crop yields.

6. Integrated Soil Fertility Management (ISFM)

Integrated Soil Fertility Management combines the use of organic materials (like compost and manure) with chemical fertilizers in a balanced way.

Benefits:

- Maximizes crop productivity by ensuring adequate nutrient supply
- Improves efficiency of fertilizers when used with organic matter
- Enhances soil structure and biological activity
- Supports long-term soil fertility and sustainability

This approach is especially useful for small farmers, as it provides both immediate and long-term benefits.

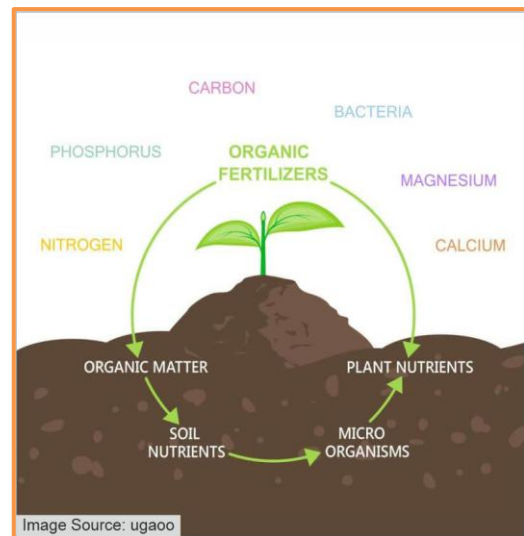


Figure 5: Benefits of organic fertilizers

Conclusion

Organic matter management is not just a farming practice—it is the foundation of sustainable agriculture. Healthy soils rich in organic matter produce better crops, resist environmental stress, and help combat climate change. For the future of agriculture, farmers, scientists, and policymakers must work together to promote practices that restore and maintain soil organic matter. By doing so, we can ensure productive soils, food security, and a healthier planet for generations to come.

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