

Agriculture and Allied Sciences

Modern Concepts



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**THE PUSTAKALAYA
PUBLICATION**

Facebook: [theustakalaya.in](https://www.facebook.com/theustakalaya.in)
Email: theustakalaya.in@gmail.com

Available at

amazon

Flipkart



MRP: ₹399/-

ISBN 978-81-69225-82-3



9 788169 225823

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The Pustakalaya

Publisher:

The Pustakalaya

Jail Road, Bangla Bazar,
Near Indian Bank, Lucknow - 226002
Email - thepustakalaya.in@gmail.com

First Published by The Pustakalaya in 2026

Agriculture and Allied Sciences: Modern Concepts

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Dr. Subhas Adak, Priyadarshini Sanjay Borale & Dr. Adaikkan Yogapriya
First Edition 2026

ISBN: 978-81-69225-82-3

Editing - Dr. S. Suresh, Dr. D. Malathi, Jyoti Sankhala, Dr. Subhas Adak,
Priyadarshini Sanjay Borale & Dr. Adaikkan Yogapriya

Printer - Repro Books Limited

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Soil Organic Matter and Humus Formation

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1. Introduction

Soil organic matter is an enigmatic substance. Its paramount importance for many aspects of soil function, such as fertility, nutrient cycling, biological activity, water retention, and response to climate change, is firmly established. Yet its definition is anything but straightforward, and understanding of the factors controlling soil organic matter dynamics remains imperfect. Soil organic matter is typically conceptualized as the net accumulation of plant, microbial, and animal residues and products. However, many soil organic matter components do not reflect the properties of these precursors, particularly in terms of molecular structure. Chemical characteristics and relations between residues, processes, and end products must therefore be elucidated. Humus, the term often used to describe the dark-colored, relatively stable fraction of soil organic matter, is perhaps the most complex substance on Earth. Its specific macromolecular composition cannot be clearly delineated, and no single model accounts satisfactorily for all its properties. A knowledge of humus composition and its formation pathways nevertheless provide a powerful means of framing and interpreting the substances and processes involved in soil organic matter formation, stabilization, turnover, and function.