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Fertilizing and Feeding Your Plants

Plants don't eat, but they do need to be fed. How's that for a paradox? Define feed as a verb meaning: "to supply something necessary for growth" and it becomes clear.

Why Fertilize?

Plants need certain chemical elements in order to grow properly. Some of these elements are found in the atmosphere (like carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen), while others are found in the soil. Some of these soil dwelling elements, called nutrients, are quickly depleted and must be replenished. Fertilizing adds nutrients to the soil.

Nutrients necessary for plant growth are divided into two major categories: Macro-nutrients and Micro-Nutrients. The title does not refer to importance, it refers to quantity. The classification and number of nutrients is disputed, and can vary by plant.

When to Fertilize

Deciding when to fertilize is not as difficult as it might seem. Some general guidelines and indicators will get you on the right path. First some guidelines:

- Fertilizing is normally not necessary the first year after planting
- Never fertilize a plant in the late summer/early fall
- Use organic fertilizers where possible
- Over abundance of nutrients is as harmful as a deficiency
- A soil test is the best indication of nutrient requirement

Clues indicating fertilization is necessary:

- Poor, stunted growth
- Chlorosis (leaves looking yellow or pale green)
- Lack of flowering and fruiting

Sources

This sheet has been compiled from experience, the Pennsylvania Certified Horticulturist Reference Guide, and Rodale's Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening

Types of Fertilizer

After establishing that your plant needs to be fed, it is necessary to decide what type of fertilizer to use. There are many options available.

Organic vs. Synthetic

This distinction separates fertilizers based upon origin. Those that were, or were a by product of, a living organism are considered organic. Synthetic fertilizers undergo a synthesis to become a fertilizer. Generally speaking, synthetic fertilizers have more nutrients available faster than organic fertilizers.

Slow Release vs. Fast Release

This refers to the speed at which the nutrients are available to plants. Slow release fertilizers have a lasting effect that is longer than fast release fertilizers.

For annual flowering plants a water soluble fertilizer (e.g. MiracleGro) applied every few weeks will improve plant performance.

Larger plants are best fertilized with a granular fertilizer, preferably organic. This allows the fertilizer to be released into the soil gradually throughout the season. A maximum of one or two applications is necessary per year.

Quick List of Recommended Fertilizers

- **Flower-tone®** slow release for perennials and annuals
- **Holly-tone®** for acid loving plants
- **MiracleGro®** fast release for annuals
- **Plant-tone®** for general feeding
- **Tree-tone®** for flowering and shade trees