

HOME & GARDEN TIPS

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Shrub Fertilization is Important

Fertilization is an important part of landscape maintenance, especially where much of the topsoil is removed during development and subsoil deficient in essential nutrients becomes the new topsoil.

Unfortunately, fertilization is a rather simple cultural practice made complex and confusing by the wide variety of fertilizer products on the market today. They range from “general-purpose” garden fertilizer to specialty products, such as pre-mixed liquid fertilizer concentrates, water-soluble crystals, slow-release fertilizers, azalea/camellia fertilizers and rose specials. Plants generally do not care whether a fertilizer is granulated, liquefied, encapsulated, or pelletized. They simply want nutrients in any form that they can use.

Fertilizers, however, differ in nutrient content and release duration. The type of fertilizer you select should be based not only on its cost, but also on the types of plants being fertilized, the existing nutrient content of the soil, and the type of growth response desired. Liquid or water-soluble fertilizers, for instance, are often used on annuals and herbaceous perennials immediately after transplanting because their nutrients can be absorbed quickly and used by the plant. Woody ornamentals, on the other hand, store food reserves in their roots, and do not have an immediate demand for nutrients after transplanting as short-season annuals do. They benefit from slow-release fertilizers that ensure a supply of nutrients as needed.

To determine whether a granular fertilizer has slow-release properties, look at the analysis on the back of the bag. Nitrogen listed in the form of ammoniacal nitrogen indicates that the product has some slow-release property. If the nitrogen is listed as being derived from urea, urea-formaldehyde, IBDU (isobutylenediurea), or sulfur-coated urea, the release duration of the product will be increased. Some granular slow-release fertilizers last six to eight months after application. These fertilizers generally cost more per pound than general-purpose granular fertilizers, but they also last longer and don't need to be applied as frequently.

Organic fertilizer sources, such as bone meal, cottonseed meal and animal manures, can also be used. Compost is another good source of slowly available nutrients.

Which fertilizer analysis is best? A soil test, available through the County Agent office, is the best way to determine which fertilizer analysis is best for your soil. As a general guideline, most ornamental plants will benefit from a fertilizer having its primary nutrients nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium (N-P-K) in a 3-1-2 or 4-1-2 ratio. A 12-4-8 fertilizer, for instance, is a 3-1-2 ratio and a 16-4-8 fertilizer is a 4-1-2 ratio. Research shows that phosphorus, the middle number in the analysis, is held by soils and does not

leach with rains or irrigation as nitrogen or potassium do. It is usually needed in lower amounts. On new sites where phosphorus has never been applied, a complete balanced fertilizer, such as 8-8-8 or 10-10-10, is sometimes recommended.