

Care and Fertilization of Ornamental Plants and Shrubs

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Most established ornamental plants in the landscape require care to stay healthy and attractive. Regular fertilization, pruning, watering, mulching and pest control are all part of a good landscape management program.

Some plants, such as annual flowers, roses, red-tip photinia and English laurel, are more demanding than others. Annual flowers and roses must be kept well-supplied with nutrients and water at all times, pruned and groomed routinely, and monitored regularly for pests if they are to flower abundantly. Red-tip photinia and English laurel are very susceptible to leaf spot diseases and demand more care.

On the other hand, plants such as ornamental grasses, hollies and junipers, when properly planted on a good site, require little care once established and are considered good low-maintenance plants.

Caring for ornamental plants is more difficult when they are not well-suited to the site selected or when they are improperly planted. Azaleas, for instance, prefer a moist, well-drained soil and shade from mid-afternoon sun. When planted in poorly drained soil or in full sun without the benefit of irrigation, azaleas become stressed, susceptible to attack from insects and diseases, and require more care. Planting too deeply or too shallowly also causes plant problems.

A soil test 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; so 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 and 10-10-10 is sometimes recommended.

Research shows that woody plants actively absorb nutrients from the soil during the growing season and require few nutrients during the dormant winter season. Therefore, apply fertilizer as soon as the plants begin breaking dormancy in the spring, and avoid fertilizing after the first fall frost which signals plants to begin resting for the winter.

The frequency of fertilization depends on the type of plants being fertilized and the type of fertilizer used. If slow-release fertilizers are used, one application should be sufficient for the entire growing season (product indicates 3, 6, or 9 month material). If general purpose granular fertilizers are used, two or three applications may be needed, depending on the fertilizer's slow-release properties.

When general-purpose granular fertilizers such as 12-4-8 or 10-10-10 are used on newly-planted ground covers, annuals, herbaceous perennials and roses, light applications made at four to six-week intervals are recommended. During periods of limited rainfall or drought, reduce the amount of fertilizer applied and the frequency of application in non-irrigated areas. Fertilizers may injure the roots of ornamentals under drought stress.

Newly-planted ornamental trees and shrubs will benefit from light applications of fertilizer made during the first growing season after transplanting. Uniformly broadcast the fertilizer along the perimeter of the planting hole. Avoid using weed-and-feed fertilizers in the vicinity of newly-planted ornamentals because injury from the herbicide may result.

For more information on fertilization rates and timing of fertilization for ornamentals, contact the Pierce County Extension Service.