

Fertilizer Not Always a Good Thing
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I was recently asked if, while watering the lawn this winter, fertilizer should be added to the water. There are many times when fertilizer is not a good thing for plants. This is one example.

Fertilizer is not plant food. It provides nutrients plants need to grow and function. It is through photosynthesis that plants produce their own food in the form of carbohydrates and sugars. No matter how much we fertilize a plant, we are not feeding it.

Fertilizer is not plant medicine. If a plant appears sickly or has a pest issue, don't fertilize it. Identify and correct the problem first. Forcing a stressed plant to grow may only increase stress and damage.

Fertilizer, especially the nutrient nitrogen, promotes or forces plant growth. If it is an active growth period for a plant and not a stress period, then the correct rate of fertilizer can be a good thing.

Winter is not an active growth period. Adding fertilizer will not be beneficial at this time. However, nutrients could leach out of soil to contaminate water resources.

Rules of thumb to follow for fertilization are to not fertilize dormant or stressed plants, unless the stress is a nutritional deficiency; and do not fertilize during stress periods such as heat, drought or a disease or insect outbreak.

Determine why a plant is struggling, correct the cause, and only then fertilize if needed. Too often, fertilizer is used like medicine when the true issue should be identified and dealt with first.

Once the stress period, like heat or drought, has passed or a pest problem has been addressed, fertilizer might then be a good thing to aid plant recovery.

There also seems to be a thought process that fertilizing dormant plants in late winter or early spring will encourage them to come out of dormancy and resume growth sooner.

If this would happen, it could set plants up for cold temperature injury or force top growth at the expense of root growth due to cold soil temperatures.

Allow plants to come out of dormancy naturally, and allow soil temperatures to warm before starting plant fertilization.

Lawns are a good example. Fertilizer should not be applied until the turf has greened up and the grass is actively growing. For do it yourselfers, most turf fertilization would not begin until May.

When fertilizing, apply the correct rate. Too much fertilizer can burn roots or lead to overly succulent growth at higher risk of pest attacks. Excess nitrogen can also leach out of soil.

Another rule of thumb with fertilization is to have a soil test done every 3 to 5 years to determine what nutrients are needed. Basic soil tests mainly test for the macronutrients nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium and sometimes iron.

If the soil is correctly managed, and not ignored, most of the other nutrients should be available in adequate amounts. Correct soil management includes the addition of organic matter on a regular basis, not overwatering, preventing soil compaction, and limiting tillage when possible.