

Natural Garden Fertilizers Explained

How does your garden grow? Can it use a little help? Before you start pouring on the toxic chemical fertilizers, maybe you should think about getting back to nature.

Gardeners are quick to resort to chemical fertilizers that claim to offer great results, but at a price. These compounds can actually burn your plants and grass, and damage the soil. Fortunately, there are dozens of natural garden fertilizers on the market.

Choosing one of nature's fertilizers is a great way to boost the health and beauty of your garden, but it is also possible to overplay your good intentions and kill your plants with kindness.

The following steps will help you give your garden the balanced diet it needs:

* Know What's in the Bag

Manufacturers of natural garden fertilizers are required to clearly list the ingredients on their product labels. Understanding these regulations can make it easier for consumers to compare the products before buying.

* Find the Right Balance

Most fertilizers have three numbers displayed on the front label. You'll see that these numbers are separated by dashes, for example, "5-10-5". This series of numbers is actually the fertilizer analysis, or percentage weight, of the three major nutrients that your plants need to thrive and survive. They are nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P), and potassium (K).

Let's say you've purchased a ten-pound bag of natural garden fertilizer with the "5-10-5" on the label. That means it contains 5% nitrogen, 10% phosphorous, and 5% potassium. A total of 20% of the fertilizer's contents includes major nutrients that your plants need. So, what is the other 80% made up of? Most manufacturers include additional nutrients to their natural garden fertilizers, plus filler materials. These additional ingredients should also be listed on the label.

* Complete Fertilizers

Natural garden fertilizers that contain all three of the major types of nutrients (potassium, nitrogen and phosphorous) are often called "complete fertilizers". Most gardeners choose these formulations to use in their gardens. That's because these three major nutrients work synergistically with each other, helping plants grow strong and stay healthy.

* Nutritional Benefits

Nitrogen found in natural garden fertilizers helps to encourage foliage growth in plants. Phosphorous, on the other hand, contributes to many of the fundamental plant processes such as rooting and setting flower buds. Potassium contributes greatly to the overall health and vigor of plants.

The needs of different plants can and will vary, so don't just assume that what works in your mom's garden will naturally work just as well for yours. Choosing a natural garden fertilizer may depend on several different factors, including the nutrient content of your soil.

Soil is the most important part of gardening, and experts suggest that you should have a soil sample tested before you purchase and apply your fertilizers. Many of the better garden centers will offer this type of soil test, free of charge. Bring a soil sample in a clean plastic bottle to find out what's present, and what's missing, in your soil. If the pH levels are too high or too low, your plants will not be able to get the full benefits of the nutrients, even if they are present in the soil. Natural garden fertilizers act as helping hands to your garden, but they will not act as saviors to your dying specimens. Sometimes the problem is not with the plants, but with the soil itself.

Your choice of fertilizer will also depend upon the type of plants that are growing in your garden. Never assume that fertilizers are "one size fits all", and that every plant will flourish with an application of 20-20-20 natural garden fertilizers. Flowers, landscaping plants, vegetables, groundcovers, shrubs and grasses may all have different fertilizer requirements.

Ask a trusted source, like an associate at a respected garden center, for advice about which natural garden fertilizers are best for your specific plants.