

Fertilizers for your Landscape

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I'm passionate about outdoor living and creating landscapes that work for you. You work too hard and your outdoor environment should be easy to enjoy. That's where my single greatest tip comes in: Fertilize your landscape. In this short piece, I hope I motivate you to be the difference in a greener and healthier backyard.

One of the first questions we need to ask is why we fertilize? Performance is the answer. Making essential nutrients available to plants allows them to thrive. This translates into more lush growth, abundant flowers and improved fruit set. In areas of the Central Coast where environmental factors are a challenge, you can see the difference in well fed landscapes immediately.

Now for a quick lesson in fertilizers. By law, each fertilizer is labeled with percentages of three essential nutrients: nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. The easiest way to remember these: N stands for Nitrogen and is essential in leaf and stem growth. P stands for Phosphorus and is essential in root growth. K stands for Potassium and is essential for cellular functions and fruiting / flowering. There are a total of (17) essential nutrients that plants need and N, P & K are the most essential. These nutrients come from organic and conventional origins.

Organic fertilizer is a great choice for backyard gardeners. In an organic fertilizer, the three numbers are usually lower. However, they tend to not be water soluble and stay present in the soil longer. This gives you a bigger bang for your buck in some ways. One important distinction from conventional fertilizers is the fact that organic fertilizers are slow release due to the fact that micro-organisms need to break the fertilizer down to make the N, P and K plant available.

Conventional fertilizers have their benefits as well. The nutrients are immediately available. I've seen miracles with winter feeding using conventional fertilizers on sick and tired lawns. One of the most common means of using a conventional fertilizer is throwing pellets of 15-15-15 on landscapes. Many folks are believers in a coated conventional fertilizer like an Osmocote. This helps to limit release over time.

One of my favorite case studies for the importance of fertilizing landscapes is my in-laws house. They live on a hillside in the Las Palmas Community of Salinas. I'm not exaggerating when I say they suffer from some of the worst soil known to man. The only

way my father in law has been able to succeed (outside of regular watering) is to put his landscape on a feeding program. He uses both organic and conventional fertilizers.

If there was one last suggestion I could leave you with, it would be the importance of adding compost to your landscape on a regular basis. Simply spreading it under the drip line of plants and trees will do a lot to enrich soil health. Like a slow release organic fertilizer, you'll see the benefits of essential nutrients available in the compost.

Just by reading this article you are already ahead of landscapers and gardeners that don't feed. Winter is the perfect time to act and you'll find your favorite landscape supply ready to help you with bulk fertilizers, amendments and soils. A well fed landscape is a healthy and vibrant one.

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Steve McShane Biography (Revised 5-18)

Steve McShane is Owner & General Manager of McShane's Landscape Supply in Salinas, California. He has a B.S. in Soil Science from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo and an M.B.A. from Santa Clara. He serves on the Salinas City Council. When not working, he loves hiking, traveling to far reaches of the planet and experimenting with exotic fruits. He can be reached at steve@mcshaneslandscape.com or (831) 455-1369.