

Data from Univ. of Michigan Research Trials

FOLIAR APPLIED FERTILIZER

Foliar Fertilization is the most efficient way to increase yield and plant health. Tests have shown that foliar feeding can increase yields from 12% to 25% when compared to conventional fertilization.

Tests, conducted in different locations, under different environmental conditions, have reflected the following;

▶ When fertilizers are foliar applied, more than 90% of the fertilizer is utilized by the plant. When a similar amount is applied to the soil, only 10 percent of it is utilized.

▶ In the sandy loam, foliar applied fertilizers are up to 20 times more effective when compared to soil applied fertilizers.

Foliar feeding is an effective method for correcting soil deficiencies and overcoming the soil's inability to transfer nutrients to the plant under low moisture conditions.

The effectiveness of foliar applied nutrients is determined by (1) The condition of the leaf surface, in particular the waxy cuticle. The cuticle is only partially permeable to water and dissolved nutrients and, as a result, it can limit nutrient uptake. (2) The length of time the nutrient remains dissolved in the solution on the leaf's surface. (3) Diffusion, the movement of elements from a high concentration to a low concentration. For diffusion to occur, the nutrient must dissolve, and (4) The type of formulation. Water-soluble formulations generally work better for foliar applications as they are more easily absorbed when compared to insoluble solutions.

GUIDELINES FOR FOLIAR FEEDING APPLICATIONS

▶ Use a sprayer that produces a fine mist.

▶ Nozzles should be turned to the back of the sprayers so the flow of material approaches the plant at a 90 degree angle to float on the plants.

University of Tennessee - Prof. T.S. Osborne, Agronomist

"... research indicated that only 10 to 12 per cent of phosphorus fertilizers are taken up by plants in the first year; the rest was "locked in" the soil or washed away. Fertilizer applied to soil is largely wasted because it is either bound by soil particles or is washed out of the root zone. If chemical elements could go directly into leaves and bypass the wastefulness of soils, a tremendous saving would result. ♦

♦... the foliage of plants can take in nutrients much as roots can. Many nutrients are readily taken up by foliage, including bark of dormant trees; even at temperatures below freezing. Elements such as phosphorus, nitrogen, and potassium move both up and down from the point of application at rates similar to that following root absorption."

University of Michigan - Drs. Witter and Turkey as quoted in Readers Digest magazine

"... leaves lap up food like blotting paper and it spreads in a few hours from tip to root. In many cases, as

much as 95 percent of the food sprayed on the leaves is used immediately by the plant, where under some conditions, the roots take up no more than 10 percent of the same amount placed in the soil."

Louisiana State University - Drs. A.L. Bertrand and L. L. Rusoff

"Tracer elements were used to ascertain conclusively that plants absorb nutrients through their foliage, fruit, flowers, and twigs as well as their roots."

Agricultural Chemicals Magazine

"Phosphorus availability studies have given a ratio of 20 to 1 in favor of foliar feeding over soil feeding. There seems little doubt that where soil fixation exists, foliar applications of nutrients constitute the most efficient method of fertilizer "placement" and with plants of sufficient leaf area, foliar feeding with ALL the elements can make a significant contribution toward the total nutrient requirement."

Ontario Agricultural College - Dr. T.E. Bates

"We increase corn yields 7 bushels per acre at five different locations with liquid fertilizer placed directly with the seed. The corn also received the recommended amounts of fertilizer in a band. The most startling difference is in the size. Some fields were half again as tall two weeks after the corn came up."

Big Farmer Magazine

Dr. S.H. Wittwer of Michigan State

"Farmer should fertilize according to soil test recommendations, follow with 'starter solutions' or 'pop-up' fertilizers and finish the job with foliar applications."

WHAT IS FOLIAR FERTILIZER?

Foliar fertilization is any fertilizing substance applied in a liquid form.

Modern foliar fertilizers are concentrated solutions using very high grade technical elements, in which the nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium are combined to the desired ratio in a controlled environment.

The fertilizing elements in this method are true solutions, soluble, and thus very plant available.

This is in contrast to soil applied (solid) fertilizer, which is applied as a powder or granules to the soil in dry form. This then, has to be dissolved, by moisture (rain) to be plant available via the roots. In other words, it has to dissolve into the soil solution to be available.

To these foliar solutions, trace elements in the form of chelates are added, along with other additives to give a balanced fertilizer, supplying not only NPK, but all the trace elements as well as growth hormones, vitamins etc.

Comparative efficiency of foliar and soil applications of fertilizer.

Approximate ratios of amounts required for comparable Authority responses				
Nutrient and salt	Type of Crop	Foliar	Soil	Authority
Zinc (ZnSO ₄)	Annual crops	1	12	Lingle & Holmberg (1956)
Phosphorus (H ₃ PO ₄)	beans, tomatoes	1	20	Wittwer, et al. (1957)
Iron (FeSO ₄)	grain sorghum	1	25	Withee & Carlson (1959)
Magnesium (MgSO ₄)	grain sorghum	1	100	Krantz (1962)
	celery	1	50-100	Johnson, et al. (1957, 1961)

Where isotopes showed that it was 8-10 times more effective to foliar feed a plant as far as the amount of nutrients required and the speed with which those nutrients were utilized, the above authorities found the figure to be between 12 and 100 times more effective.

The readily- available nutrients are more easily utilized, as they are directly available to a plant and because they do not have to be dissolved by moisture before going into the soil solution and where they may be subjected to insolubilization by incident anions such as carbonate, bicarbonate, hydroxide, etc, known as fixation.

Also important in foliar fertilizers, is whether or not the products being used are chelated. Chelation, allows a nutrient to "maintain its own identity" within the spray tank, and not get tied up by other nutrients or pesticides being used with it.

These days we have materials available which are ideally suited to spray applications.

Plant hormones

Plant hormones are specialized chemical substances produced by plants. Foliar fertilization is a particularly useful technique: and are the main internal factors controlling growth and development.

Hormones are produced in one part of a plant and transported to others, where they are effective in very small amounts.

Depending on the target tissue, a given hormone may have different effects.

Auxin, one of the most important plant hormones, is produced by growing stem tips and transported to other areas where it may either promote growth or inhibit it.

It also retards the abscission (dropping off) of flowers, fruits, and leaves.

Commercially, synthetic auxins are used to initiate adventitious roots from plant cuttings e.g. in nurseries.

Weed control by another synthetic auxin, 2, 4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid (2,4-D), is widespread as a selective herbicide against broadleaf weeds.

Producers have been using foliar fertilizer since the early 1950's. Even though the subject of foliar fertilization was little understood, 'experts' told farmers that they shouldn't use them, because in comparison to solid type fertilizers, foliars contained fewer nutrients.

Carbon, hydrogen and oxygen which form the actual plant structure are readily obtainable from air and water, specifically carbon dioxide or water. Along with chlorine, which is found in most water sources, these elements are generally not considered in the formulation of foliar solutions.

The following illustrates the amount of each nutrient in Kgs/ Hectare, in pasture of 2000 kg DM/ Hectare:

Table 2			
Nitrogen 90	Phosphorus 7	Potassium 44	Sulphur 6
Calcium 5	Magnesium 4	Sodium 3	Zinc .03
Copper .01	Boron .05	Cobalt .0002	Selenium .000008

Depending on the application required, foliar fertilizers can be formulated to meet very specific plant requirements.

For example a high nitrogen formulation is used when the demand in plants is for more nitrogen in relation to phosphorus and potassium, but the formulation is changed for growth periods that require higher phosphorus and / or potassium, in relation to the demand for nitrogen.

This often happens when a plant is under stress, which coincides with periods of great growth, such as when a plant is changing from a vegetative to a reproductive stage.

At the same time, the exact plant requirement for trace elements can be addressed, as a result of leaf analysis.

Certain soil conditions, such as pH, excess moisture, or cool temperatures, may render a nutrient or nutrients unavailable to the plant root.

Nutrient demand curves indicate that there are stages in a plant's life-cycle when demand for some nutrients may be greater than its physiological capacity to supply itself, even when these soil nutrients are available in abundant supply. This often occurs during the development of fruit or grain.

Data from trials on crops show that increases in yield and/or grade results from applications of foliar nutrients during these periods of peak demand.

Foliar fertilizers can be designed to meet a plants specific needs for one or more micro and macro nutrients—especially trace minerals and enables you to correct deficiencies, strengthen weak or damaged crops, speed growth and grow better plants, which is of course, the bottom line.

Foliar applications can be targeted to a particular stage of crop development to achieve specific objectives and is an excellent way to "fine tune" a high fertility program.

EFFICIENCY OF UTILIZATION OF FERTILIZER SPRAYS:

Here are some striking examples of comparisons of foliar fertilizers versus soil applications.

Such ratios favoring foliar applications exist only under extreme conditions of soil fixation. Nevertheless, they single out the effectiveness of leaves as organs for absorption.

Related to the marked efficiency in absorption of nutritional sprays may be indirect effects of this method of applying fertilizer on other plant processes.

Many different NPK formulation combinations can be made, depending on the application required. The same elements that make up foliar fertilizer are required for plant growth and development, and are formulated to meet quite specific plant requirements. (see Table 1.)

Plants are composed of the various elements in the proportions indicated below on which modern foliar fertilizers are based.

16 elements are considered essential for plant growth,

Table 1. Internal Concentrations of Essential Elements in Higher Plants - Concentration in Dry Tissue

ELEMENT	PPM	%
Hydrogen	60,000	6
Carbon	450,000	45
Oxygen	450,000	45
Nitrogen	15,000	1.5
Potassium	10,000	1.0
Calcium	5,000	0.5
Magnesium	2,000	0.2
Phosphorus	2,000	0.2
Sulphur	1,000	0.1
Chlorine	100	0.01
Boron	20	0.002
Iron	100	0.01
Manganese	50	0.005
Zinc	20	0.002
Copper	6	0.0006
Molybdenum	0.1	0.00001

These essential elements are divided into two groups: the macronutrients: those required in relatively large quantities including carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, magnesium and sulphur and the micronutrients, those required in small quantities; including iron, chlorine, manganese, boron, zinc, copper and molybdenum.

You will see that by far the biggest proportion is hydrogen, carbon and oxygen which makes up 96% of the plant and are freely available from the air and water.

All of the other elements make up the remaining 4%, of which the major elements nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium make up 2.7%, leaving 1.3% minor or trace elements.

Nutrient demand curves indicate stages in a plant's life-cycle when the need for some nutrients may be greater than its physiological capacity to supply itself, even when these soil nutrients are abundantly available. Highly soluble potassium and nitrogen-based fertilizers can be easily washed out from the soil, and phosphate fertilizers can attach themselves to ions of potassium, magnesium, aluminum and iron into chemically insoluble form for plants.

Foliar nutrients on the other hand are mobilized directly into plant leaves, which is the goal of fertilization to begin with, increasing the rate of photosynthesis in the leaves, and by doing so stimulate nutrient absorption by plant roots.

Foliar fertilization is by far the most effective way to apply micro nutrients or trace elements, and supplement the major elements. The readily available nutrients are more easily utilized, because they do not have to be dissolved by moisture and go into the soil solution.

Foliar fertilizers used in conjunction with solid fertilizers, can be used to quickly correct a nutrient imbalance and stimulate increase in root uptake. In addition, foliar fertilization can correct deficiencies, strengthen weak or damaged crops, speed growth and grow better plants, which is of course, the bottom line.