



Is That Fertilizer Really Necessary?
by Sue McDavid
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Spring has definitely sprung and gardeners are already being advised by newspaper articles, magazine articles, friends, etc. to get outside and fertilize their plants. However, is it really necessary to do that? Since plants "make" their own food through photosynthesis, the focus instead should be on ensuring the fertility of the soil, not the plants.

One way to determine whether or not the soil is conducive to healthy plant growth is to test it, which will determine exactly what is needed, if anything, in the way of amendments to support the types of plant life desired. Soil testing kits can be bought that test the basics -- soil pH and levels of the macronutrients nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K). More extensive testing for those, as well as soil micronutrients, can be done by local soil testing laboratories (find a list of labs at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Agriculture/Soil_and_Plant_Tissue_Testing/). These tests can be invaluable because they tell a gardener exactly what is needed for soil health. All-purpose fertilizers with nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium are frequently touted as the way to go, but what if soil has adequate levels of phosphorus and potassium with no added nitrogen needed? The only way to determine this is through soil testing.

Nitrogen is perhaps the most important macronutrient to use because it is water-soluble and easily leached out of soil through rainfall and irrigation. Dry winters like the one we have experienced this year and last will not see nitrogen being as deficient in soils as in years with lots of rainfall, so this is yet another reason for soil testing.

What about synthetic vs. organic fertilizers? First, it is important to know that synthetic fertilizers are derived from petroleum products. They are less expensive than organic ones and results are seen faster. But over the long run, organic fertilizers will work the same, just more slowly. Many are also not high in the percentage of nutrients needed, but over time tend to result in healthier soil which in turn produces healthier plants. Amending soil on a regular basis with

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organic matter such as compost and leaf litter, will eventually lead to soil that is often called "black gold" by seasoned gardeners, and fertilizers will not be needed as frequently.

So, before you rip open that bag of fertilizer to spread over the garden, ask yourself if it's really needed -- maybe getting a soil analysis first would be a better way to go.

Join UCCE Master Gardeners and Master Food Preservers of El Dorado County for this Saturday's free class: Tomatoes from Seed to Pot. Tomatoes are a favorite in spring and summer gardens, and are often the reason people start gardening in the first place. This class will show you how to choose the right tomato varieties for the foothills, deal with pests, and care for tomatoes. The second half of the class will show what you can do with the tomato harvest: canning, dehydrating, and freezing. The three hour class starts at 9:00 a.m. in the Government Center Hearing Room, Building C, 2850 Fairlane Court in Placerville.

Also on this Saturday, March 28, is a free Master Gardener class on Drip Irrigation, showing backyard gardeners how to preserve water resources during the drought, while providing adequate water to plants and landscaping. The basics of home sprinkler systems will be covered – learn how to provide the right amount of water plants need while reducing your water bill. Class is from 1:00 – 4:30 p.m. at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, Folsom Lake College El Dorado Center, 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville.

UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at the office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardener website at <http://ucanr.edu/edmg> and you can also find us on Facebook.