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Fertilizing the Natural Way: using organic fertilizers

Gardeners often find themselves confused by the numerous types of fertilizers available. Many have become concerned about over-use of synthetic fertilizers and have become interested in organic products. If you're one of those gardeners, read on for an introduction to organic fertilizers and their benefits.

Let's start with the differences between synthetic and organic fertilizers:

Synthetic fertilizers are "man made" from sources such as ammonia, ammonium sulfate and urea which are by-products from the oil and gas industry. Organic fertilizers are derived from the remains or by-products of living organisms.

Synthetic fertilizers tend to break down quickly in the soil and used by the plants right away. New "slow release" synthetics break down more slowly than water-soluble fertilizers.

In contrast, the nutrients of organic fertilizers are released slowly as soil organisms break down the fertilizer. Consequently, organics work best in moist soil that is warm enough for microorganisms to be active, and the nutrients are available to plants over a longer time period.

Although organic fertilizers work more slowly than synthetic fertilizers they offer several advantages:

- increasing organic matter in the soil which, in turn, increases the soil's water-holding capacity
- improving soil texture which allows more air to circulate to roots
- increasing bacterial and fungal activity in the soil. Mycorrhizal fungi, which make other nutrients more available to plants, thrive in soil with high organic content.

There are numerous organic options available so here are some basic points to help you make the best choice when selecting organic fertilizers.

Blood meal is high in nitrogen which supports vegetative (leafy growth). It is broken down quickly so the nitrogen is available to plants right away. This is a good choice for heavy feeders.

Bone meal is an excellent source of phosphorus which assists in root formation, and flower and fruit production. Bone meal releases its nutrients slowly so it is safe to use when transplanting young plants. It also helps to reduce the effects of transplant shock.

Corn gluten meal is an excellent source of slow-release nitrogen. It is especially beneficial for turf but can also be used on shrubs and other ornamentals. Corn gluten suppresses seedling emergence so it can keep weeds down in your lawn and garden beds.

Cottonseed meal produces a slightly acidic reaction so it is often used to fertilize acid-loving plants such as azaleas, camellias and rhododendrons. Like blood meal, it is an excellent source of nitrogen but releases its nutrients more slowly.

Fish emulsion is high in nitrogen and trace minerals. It can boost a plant's growth spurt if applied just as it is beginning to sprout. Follow the application with a deep watering.

Liquid seaweed contains not only the macro-nutrients nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium but all the trace elements needed by plants. It also contains cytokinins which increases the efficiency of photosynthesis and the production of protein.

Give organics a try – your soil and plants will appreciate it!

