



Fertilizing Tips

Know what you are applying:

All fertilizer packages must have three numbers on them (example: 10-10-10, 16-4-8). The numbers represent the percentages of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K) – in that order – by weight. This is also referred to as the N-P-K ratio. While all three are necessary for proper growth, many soils have enough of certain nutrients.

Generally, nitrogen promotes grass shoot growth and leafy top growth, phosphorus encourages root, flower, and fruit production, and potassium fosters hardiness, disease resistance, and durability. A fertilizer is said to be complete when it contains nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. A 100-pound bag of 15-10-10 fertilizer, for example, contains 15 percent nitrogen, 10 percent phosphorus, and 10 percent potassium. Some crops require more of some nutrients than others. Root crops, such as carrots, garlic, and radishes, require less nitrogen than leafy crops.

Choosing the right fertilizer:

Before using any fertilizer get a soil test to find out the best type and amount of fertilizer for your yard. Remember, the best fertilizer for your lawn has a slowly available nitrogen source. "Slow release nitrogen" sources are usually stated on the label, possibly as WIN or waterinsoluble nitrogen, sulfur-coated urea, natural organic nitrogen, etc.

What NOT to use:

Unless you are establishing a new yard, most soils in the Chesapeake Bay region already have an abundance of phosphorus. Use a fertilizer with zero or low amounts of phosphorus.

What's the scoop on composting?

Compost is not only a good alternative to fertilizer; it's an excellent soil conditioner. Yards that use compost need less water and fertilizer, so you save money. Plus, you can get one of those cool compost bins.

Leave grass clippings on the lawn after mowing. Nitrogen from the clippings will nourish the soil, which means you'll need less fertilizer.

How/when to apply fertilizer:

Do a soil test to find out the best type and amount of fertilizer for your yard.

Apply it right. Use only the amount of fertilizer you really need. Too much fertilizer will actually weaken your lawn. Keep fertilizer off paved surfaces and don't apply it before it rains.

Otherwise, you'll just be sending the fertilizer—and your money—down the drain.

Never apply fertilizer to a dormant lawn, because it could kill your grass.

Some helpful guidelines:

Fertilize when grass is actively growing and can take up the nutrients. Look for fertilizers with a high percentage (30 percent or higher) of slowly available nitrogen. It releases fertilizer slowly, and your lawn makes better use of it. NEVER apply more than 1 pound of soluble nitrogen per 1,000 square feet at a time. More is not better. Lawn fertilizer is applied in pounds per 1,000 square feet. To determine square feet, multiply the length by the width of the area to be fertilized. NEVER apply fertilizer to driveways, sidewalks or roadways. Sweep or blow fertilizer spilled on hard surfaces into the turf.