

Soil fertility can be amended

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Transplanted gardeners encounter challenges when they move to the Gulf Coast. They complain that they can't grow flowers or vegetables here. The Florida transplant must learn how to manage soil fertility in order to successfully grow flowers and vegetables.

Many gardeners reside along the coast where deep infertile sands are the norm. These sands don't hold certain plant nutrients for long periods of time and must be supplemented periodically.

I know that "up North" all that you have to do is spread some fertilizer, prepare and plant. Some of those rich soils have a great buffering capacity and are able to slowly release nutrients over the entire season as needed. Try that here, and within five or six weeks you will have pale, anemic plants.

Supplemental fertilization is the key to having vigorous, productive flowers and vegetables. This practice is known as side-dressing by local farmers.

On sandy sites nitrogen and potassium should be supplemented approximately once each month during the growing season or after every heavy rainy period.

A basic, balanced garden fertilizer can be used when preparing to plant. For supplemental applications during the season then use a product without phosphorus. Examples include fertilizer with an analysis such as 15-0-15, 15-0-14 and 20-0-20.

Think "spoon feeding" when side-dressing or making these light, more frequent fertilizer applications. It does no good to apply large amounts. The fertilizer won't last any longer and can burn plants.

Here are some side-dressing tips:

- Granular fertilizer can be sprinkled lightly at the edge of each plant's canopy and watered in. Use about 1 pound per 100 square feet or per 100 feet of row.
- Liquid, or soluble, fertilizer works well if applied correctly. Read the label carefully before mixing because some soluble products are used for both soil and leaf application. Mix at the soil application rate and soak the soil around plants with the solution.
- Foliar applications, using low rates, might green up plants, but the effects are shorter-lived.
- Gardeners with limited time should consider the coated or slow-release products. Some of these, though more expensive than standard dry fertilizers, can release nutrients for months.
- Organic gardeners can side-dress with such products as cottonseed, soybean or alfalfa meal. They are not likely to burn plants and are slow-acting. The meals should be applied about two or three weeks before the plants are projected to need the nutrients.
- It is possible to amend even a sandy site to the point that supplemental fertilizer applications are not required. This is often done by organic gardeners and others who incorporate large amounts of organic amendments such as composts and manures. Though it normally takes years to amend the soil to such an extent, many say it is worth the effort.

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