

Use Proper Fertilizer and Timing for Fall Fertilization

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A popular belief is that fall fertilizing strengthens plants and better prepares them for winter. However, getting the desired results from a fall fertilization of the lawn and shrub beds requires doing it with the right fertilizer, not with just any fertilizer labeled as a "winterizer".

The practice of fall fertilization centers around potassium, sometimes called potash. This is the nutrient element that is said to impart cold hardiness to plants.

Soil testing of local lawns and shrub beds often indicates low levels of potassium by late summer. So, it would seem obvious that just applying some of this element would remedy the situation. It's not always as simple as that, though, because many currently available lawn and garden fertilizers contain relatively low amounts of potassium and high amounts of other elements that aren't needed or beneficial at this time of year.

Select a fertilizer carefully when preparing for a fall application. The analysis should show a relatively high percentage of potassium, which is the last number on the label. The first number indicates the percentage of nitrogen, which should be low and the middle number is phosphorus, which should also be low. A

5-0-15, 5-3-15, 5-0-20 or similar analysis is suggested for fall fertilization.

Avoid using a fertilizer in the fall that contains relatively high levels of nitrogen. Excessive levels of this element in the soil produce lush, tender growth that is more susceptible to cold injury later.

I have known many gardeners who use high nitrogen containing fertilizers as late as October. That is a big gamble because it results in a flush of tender growth, actually waking up the grass or shrubs when they should be slowing down and going into a dormant state.

The gardener who applies high levels of nitrogen during the fall without serious cold injury and gets by with it is lucky. When luck prevails it is usually because we have a mild fall and then gradually dropping temperatures until the end of the year. This allows the plants time to respond to the nitrogen and then harden before the first freeze.

I often wonder how many of the typical spring dead spots in lawns are actually due to winter kill of over-fertilized grass. Since any freeze damage occurs while it is dormant, the symptoms would not be seen until the following spring.

Once you find and buy a high potassium fertilizer, don't wait long if you are planning on making a late season application. The potassium must be applied early enough to be taken up by roots and reach plant cells. This can only occur while the grass or shrubs are still active. Potassium will not be taken up and put to use after cold weather has arrived and plants are near or in the dormant stage.

Mid to late September is considered to be the latest that fall fertilization should be done. This provides plants several weeks to respond and store potassium.

Question of the Week: When is the recommended time for pruning fig trees?

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Answer: The edible fig is a popular fruit in local landscapes. Pruning should be limited to the removal of diseased branches and only when necessary, to keep it within bounds. Any major pruning should be done late in the dormant season and just before new spring growth occurs. This is usually during late February in our area. Avoid pruning during the fall, which could stimulate new tender growth that is more susceptible to freeze damage.

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