**Plant Nutrition**

## Plant Nutrients

Many people confuse plant nutrition with plant fertilization.  Plant nutrition refers to the need for basic chemical elements for plant growth.

The term **fertilization** refers to the application of plant nutrients.  Nutrients may be applied as commercial manufactured fertilizers, organic fertilizers and/or other soil amendments.  Organic fertilizers and soil amendments are typically low in nutrient content.  Plants need 17 elements for normal growth.  Carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen come from the air and water.  Soil is the principle source of other nutrients.  **Primary nutrients** (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium) are used in relatively large amounts and often supplemented as fertilizers.

**Secondary nutrients** (calcium, magnesium, and sulfur) are also used in large amounts but are typically readily available and in adequate supply.  **Micronutrients** or trace elements are needed only in small amounts.  These include iron, zinc, molybdenum, manganese, boron, copper, cobalt, and chlorine.  [Table 1]

Roots take up nutrients primarily as **ions** dissolved in the soil’s water.  The ions may be positively charged (**cations**) or negatively charged (**anions**).  The nutrient ion soup in the soil’s water is in a constant state of flux as the variety of ions dissolve in and precipitate out of solution.

Clay particles and organic matter are negatively charged, attracting the positively charged cations (like ammonium, NH4+, and potassium, K+) and making the cations resistant to leaching.  Negatively charged anions (like nitrate, N03-) are prone to leaching and can become a water pollution problem.  Both ammonium and nitrate are important plant nitrogen sources and are commonly found in salt forms in fertilizers.

The **Cation Exchange Capacity, CEC** is a measurement of the soil’s capacity to hold nutrients.  More precisely, it is a measurement of the negatively charged soil particle’s and organic matter’s capacity to attract the positively charged cations.

**Table 1.  Essential Plant Nutrients**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Nutrient** | **Ions Absorbed by Plants** |
| **Structural elements** | |
| Carbon, C | CO2 |
| Hydrogen, H | H2O |
| Oxygen, O | O2 |
| **Primary nutrients** | |
| Nitrogen, N | NO3-, NH4+ |
| Phosphorus, P | H2PO4-, HPO4-2 |
| Potassium, K | K+ |
| **Secondary nutrients** | |
| Calcium, Ca | Ca+2 |
| Magnesium, MG | Mg+2 |
| Sulfur, S | SO4-2 |
| **Micronutrients** | |
| Boron, B | H2BO3- |
| Chlorine, Cl | Cl- |
| Cobalt, Co | Co+2 |
| Copper, Cu | Cu+2 |
| Iron, Fe | Fe+2, Fe+3 |
| Manganese, Mn | Mn+2 |
| Molybdenum, MO | MoO4-2 |
| Zinc, Zn | Zn+2 |

## Fertility and Fertilization

Adequate soil fertility is only one of the many soil related growth factors.  Fertilizers will increase plant growth only if the plant is deficient in the nutrient applied and other growth factors (such as soil compaction, water stress or waterlogging, insect and disease problems, and weed competition) are not also significantly limiting plant growth.  [Figure 1]

From the nutritional perspective, a plant cannot tell if applied nutrients come from a manufactured fertilizer or a natural source.  Plants use nutrients in ionic forms.  Soil microorganisms must break down organic soil amendments, organic fertilizers and many manufactured fertilizers before the nutrients become usable by plants.

From a nutritional perspective, the primary difference between manufactured and organic soil amendments/organic fertilizers is the speed at which nutrients become available for plant use.  For manufactured fertilizer, their release is typically, but not always, a few days to weeks.  Some are specially formulated as “controlled release”, “slow release” or “time release” products that release over a periods of months.  With natural-organic fertilizer, nutrients typically become available over a period of months or years.  However, there are exceptions to this general rule.  The high salt content of some manufactured fertilizers and some organic soil amendments could slow the activity of beneficial soil microorganisms.

## Utah Soils and Plant Nutritional Needs

**Nitrogen**

Nitrogen is the one nutrient most often limiting plant growth.  The need for nitrogen varies from plant to plant.  For example, tomatoes and vine crops (cucumbers, squash, and melons) will put on excessive vine growth at the expense of fruiting with excess nitrogen.  Whereas potatoes, corn, and cole crops (cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower) are heavy feeders and benefit from high soil nitrogen levels.  Bluegrass turf and many annuals also benefit from routine nitrogen applications.  Trees and shrubs have a low relative need for soil nitrogen.  Utah soils benefit from nitrogen fertilization of the right amount and frequency to meet plant needs.  [Table 2 and Figure 2]

**Table 2 & Figure 2.  Symptoms of nitrogen deficiency**

Leaves

* Uniform yellowish-green
* More pronounced in older leaves
* Small, thin leaves
* Fewer leaflets
* High fall color
* Early leaf drop

Shoots

* Short, small diameter
* May be reddish or reddish brown

Soil tests have limited value in indicating nitrogen needs for a home garden or lawn since the value is constantly changing due to organic content, microorganism activity, and changes in temperature and water.

Nitrogen is useable by plants in two forms, **ammonium** (NH4+), and **nitrate** (NO3-).  Ammonium, being positively charged, is attracted to the negatively charged soil particles and thus is resistant to leaching (movement down through the soil profile).  Soil microorganisms convert ammonium to nitrate.  Nitrate, being negatively charged, readily leaches below the root zone with excess rain/irrigation on sandy soils.  Prevent water pollution by avoiding over-fertilization of nitrogen, particularly on sandy soils.

Soil microorganisms release nitrogen tied-up in organic matter over a period of time.  For example, livestock manure releases around 50% of the nitrogen the first year, 25% the second year, and so forth.  Composted manure releases only 5-20% the first year.

**Phosphorus**

**Phosphorus levels are naturally adequate in the majority of Utah soils.  Deficiencies are most likely to occur in new gardens where the organic matter content is low and the soil has a high pH (7.8 to 8.3).**  A soil test is the best method to determine the need for phosphorus fertilizers.

Phosphorus is also less available to plants when soil temperatures are cool.  In the spring, the use of starter fertilizers with phosphorus may be beneficial on herbaceous flowers and vegetable transplants.

Phosphorus deficiency is difficult to diagnose, since other growth factors will give similar symptoms.  General symptoms include sparse, green to dark green leaves.  Veins, petioles, and lower leaf surface may be reddish, dull bronze, or purple, especially when young.  Phosphorus deficiency may be observed on roses, in the early spring when soils are cold, but the condition corrects itself as soils warm.

Excessive phosphorus fertilizer can aggravate iron and zinc deficiencies and increase the soil salt content.

**Potassium**

**Potassium levels are naturally adequate and even high in most Utah soils.  Deficiencies occasionally occur in new gardens low in organic matter and in sandy soils low in organic matter.** A soil test is the best method to determine the need for potassium fertilizers.

Potassium deficiency is very difficult to diagnose, since other growth factors will give similar symptoms.  General symptoms include a marginal and interveinal chlorosis (yellowing), followed by scorching that moves inward.  Older leaves are affected first.  Leaves may crinkle and roll upward.  Shoots may show short, bushy, zigzag growth, with dieback late in season.

Excessive potash fertilizer can aggravate soil salt levels.

**Micronutrients**

**Iron**  
As for micronutrients, iron deficiency is common in Utah.  This is not from a lack of iron in the soil.  In fact, it is the iron that gives us our “red rocks”.  In high pH soils, typical of Utah, iron is chemically fixed in an insoluble form that plants cannot absorb.

**Zinc**

Zinc deficiency occasionally occurs on sandy soils containing excessive lime, and soils low in organic matter (typical of new yards where the topsoil has been removed).  Excessive phosphate fertilization may aggravate a zinc problem.  It will be seen more in years with cold wet springs.

Sweet corn, beans, and potatoes are the most likely vegetables to be affected.  Symptoms include a general stunting of the plant due to shortening of internodes (stem length between leaves).  Leaves on beans typically have a crinkled appearance and may yellow or brown.  On young corn, symptoms include a broad band of white to translucent tissue on both sides of the leaf midrib starting near the base of the leaf but generally not extending to the tip.

Occasional manure applications will supply the zinc needs.  If a soil test indicates zinc deficiency (less than 10 ppm) apply a zinc-containing fertilizer according to label directions (typically 2-4 ounces per 1,000 sq. ft.).