

Understanding Fertilizer Numbers

With season changes just around the corner, many of us are getting spring fever and are starting to purchase supplies from local garden centers for the upcoming growing season, including fertilizer. However, I have observed that many are confused when purchasing fertilizer; specifically as to what all of the numbers mean on package labels and how and when to use them.

Fertilizers usually list three numbers on the label prominently. These represent the amounts of Nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) in the particular blend by percentage. For example, a fertilizer label reading 15-15-15 would contain 15% N, 15% P and 15% K, and a label reading 46-0-0 contains 46% N and no other nutrients.

Knowing what these numbers mean can help you determine what fertilizer to use in your yard. However, you should go further by getting an inexpensive soil test performed. Many times soils have sufficient nutrients with the exception of N, and a soil test can help determine this. Utah State University as well as other private companies, provides this service. The basic test from the university costs \$14 and is sufficient for most needs. It will tell you if your soil is deficient in any major nutrients. The test will also reveal the texture of your soil, your soil salinity and pH (a measure of soil alkalinity or acidity). Knowing this is important to proper soil management

The test can also help you determine how often to fertilize according to the nutrient levels in your soil and your soil type. The type of use the lawn receives is also very important in determining how often to fertilize. If the only time your lawn receives foot traffic is when it is mowed, then two applications per year are probably sufficient. Conversely, if your turf receives much more use, then it may need up to five applications during the growing season. Utah State University has a prepared fact sheet called Basic Turfgrass Care. It can be very useful in determining how often and how much to fertilize. It can be found by accessing the following hyperlink: <http://wcwcd.state.ut.us/Conservation/Basic%20Turfgrass%20Care.pdf>.

Another question that is often asked during this time of year is how much to fertilize trees and shrubs. Generally it is not necessary to do so, especially when their proper health is being maintained. In fact, in some situations, fertilizing can make plants more susceptible to pests and diseases. Even worse, when our plants have problems, a first reaction is to fertilize. This usually does no good and can make the problem far worse. It is better to find out what is affecting the plant and alleviate the specific problem.

On a different note, free gardening classes are being offered every Tuesday night for the month of March from 6 to 9 p.m. A wide variety of subjects are being covered including, landscape planning, tree and shrub selection and home food production. Just show up. The classes are held at the new Cache County Administration Building located at 179 North Main in room 109. All are welcome.