



A Campaign of the Ochlockonee River Soil and Water Conservation District
Nancy Caire Miller, Project Coordinator 850.445.4026
Steve Urse, Outreach Coordinator 850.385.2864

FERTILIZING TIPS

When it rains, fertilizers wash off of our yards into local lakes and streams. The result is that instead of fertilizing our yards, we “fertilize” plant life in the lakes, upsetting the delicate balance of chemistry that naturally exists and causing an overabundance of plant growth. As the water system loses this balance, a cascade of negative effects on water quality occur. Our local lakes are connected to the underground aquifer, the source of drinking water for most of us. If each of us takes a few water-friendly steps in our yard practices, we’ll take action against personal pollution and make a positive change in the quality of our water.

“Less is Best”

Fertilize only as needed to maintain the health and quality of lawns and landscape plants and reduce nitrate levels. If your lawn and landscape plants are established or look healthy enough already, there's no rule that says you must fertilize them. Fertilize with a purpose, such as to increase growth, flowering or fruiting or to correct an observed nutrient deficiency (as confirmed by a soil test). Soil test materials are available from your county extension office (Leon County, 487-3004; Wakulla County, 926-3931). If landscape plants exhibit symptoms of nutrient deficiencies, they may not be happy at that site. Consider replacing them with plants more suitable for the conditions of the site.

Lawns generally need only one or two fertilizer applications per year, if any. Mature shrubs and trees usually don't need to be fertilized routinely, especially if they're well-mulched. Fertilize younger shrubs and trees as needed to make them grow; two or three applications per growing season.

Choosing a Fertilizer

If you fertilize, use fertilizers with a label that specifies at least 50 percent of the nitrogen is in a slow-release or water-insoluble form. Nitrates from slow-release sources are more likely to be used by plants and less likely to leach out or wash away when it rains. A 15-0-15 fertilizer (15 Nitrogen; 0 Phosphorus; 15 Potassium) has been found to be good for most landscape plant needs in north Florida soils. For example, the label on a 15-0-15 fertilizer should specify at least 7.5 percent water-insoluble nitrogen ($0.5 \times 15 = 7.5$). This mix of soluble and slow-release is especially important in environmentally sensitive areas. The zero means no phosphorus. Many north Florida soils, especially our clays, are high in phosphorus.

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Every drop you lose, nature finds. Slow the Flow.
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Don't use too much

When fertilizing, never use more than one pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet of area per application. To decide how many pounds of the fertilizer it takes to supply one pound of actual nitrogen, divide 100 by the percentage of nitrogen in the fertilizer. For example, it takes about 6.67 pounds of 15-0-15 fertilizer to supply one pound of nitrogen ($100/15 = 6.67$). Don't exceed this rate of fertilizer applied per 1,000 square feet of area. When applying the fertilizer, measure out the appropriate weight for the given area and place it in your fertilizer spreader. Set the spreader on a low enough setting so that you must make two passes (in a criss-cross pattern) with the spreader before you run out of fertilizer.

It's very important to apply the proper quantity of water after fertilizing if rainfall is not expected within 8-12 hours. You shouldn't apply fertilizer when heavy rains are coming. Your work will wash away with the rain.

For more local gardening information, visit the UF-IFAS Extension Website for Leon County at <http://leon.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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