May 2021
Volume 12, Issue 5

Coming Events

THINK GREEN THURSDAYS

Workshops and Demonstrations

Thurs., May 13, 10 a.m.—ONLINE
Composting Strategies
Thurs., May 27, 10 a.m.—ONLINE
Tomato Troubles
Thurs., June 10, 10 a.m.—ONLINE
What's Bugging Your Garden?

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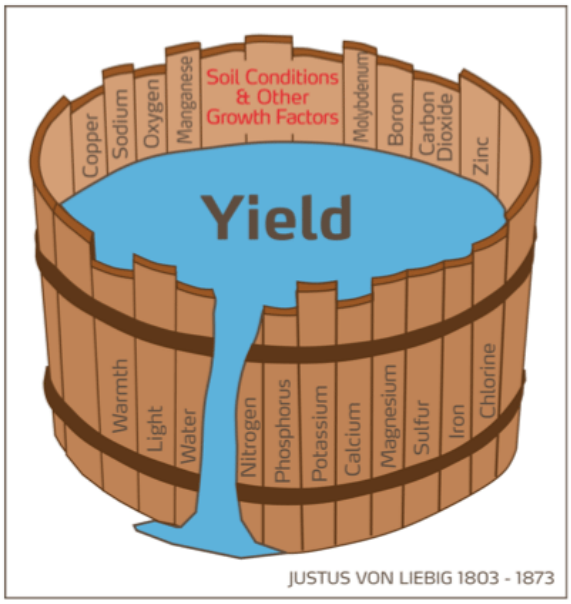
Don't Guess— Soil Test!

Spring has sprung and our lawns and gardens seem to be shouting—"Attention must be paid!" So, naturally, we wonder what kind of fertilizer we should add. And how much? And is organic best? Can I use tomato fertilizer on my squash? What's this I hear about lime?

So, many of us head to the home store and pick up the bag of promises nearest the check out and hope for the best as we spread the contents on the target indicated by the glossy picture on the bag.

There's just one problem with this plan, and in 1873 German scientist Justus von Liebig spelled it out in his "Law of the Minimum," which states, "If one growth factor/nutrient is deficient, plant growth is limited, even if all other vital factors/nutrients are adequate."



In other words, if one limiting factor is off, such as your soil's pH, no amount of fertilizer is going to give you the results you're looking for, and you may have just wasted your money and overdosed the environment with that expensive, but eye-catching bag of fertilizer.

So, what's a gardener to do?

Super Secret Soil Service—Revealed!

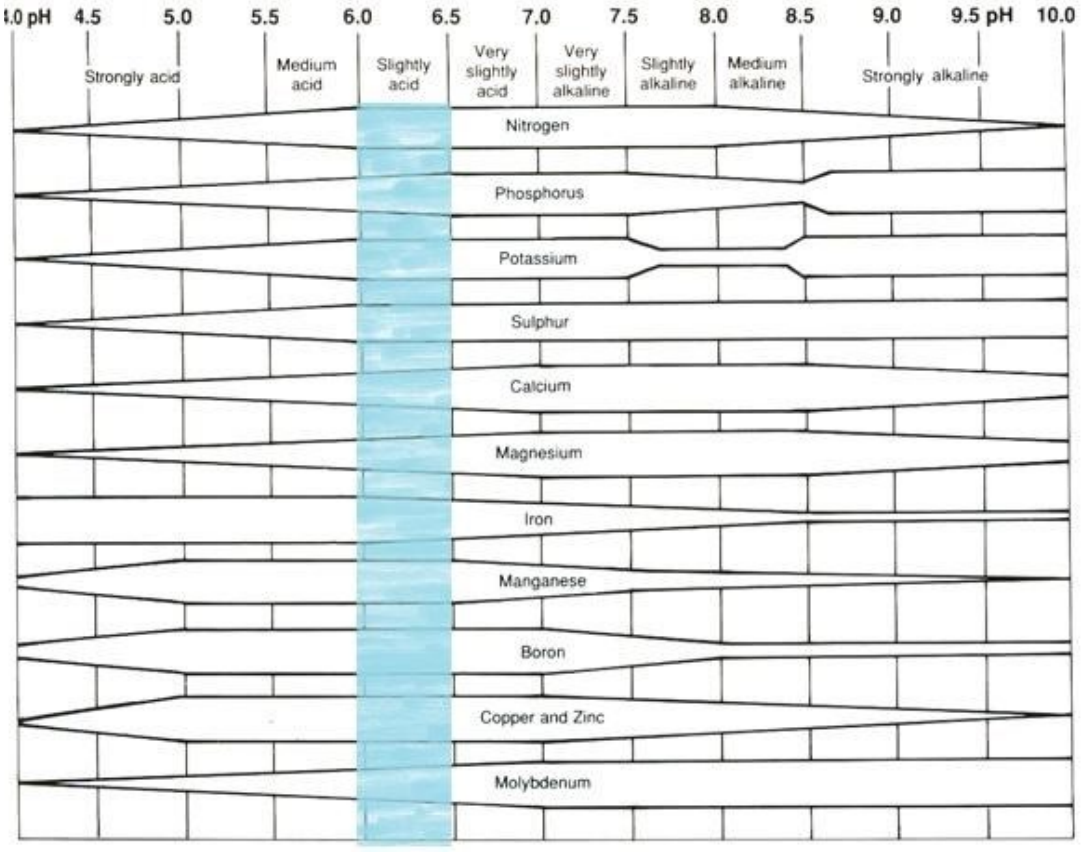
Lucky for us, the NCDA offers this service for free between now until Thanksgiving and, even better, our Extension Master Gardener Volunteers have taken on the task of delivering your soil samples to the soils lab in Raleigh, so you don't have to mail them!

Visit our office for the soil test boxes, forms and instruction pamphlet.

You will get an e-mail when your results are ready, and you'll be able to access the form here:

https://www.ncagr.gov/agronomi/uyrst.htm

If you have trouble reading the recommendation, just give me a call, and we can go over it together.



Adjusting the pH will probably be your first concern. Plants will take up nutrients most efficiently when the pH is correct, usually just a tick acidic, around 6—6.5. On average, our soils tend to run more acidic than that, so you will probably see a recommendation for the addition of lime on your soil test.

As for the "type" of fertilizer, you may be surprised to learn that the secret to all of them are the three numbers located somewhere on the package, such as "10-10-10". These three numbers represent the percentages of the three main plant nutrients in the bag—10 percent N (nitrogen), 10 percent P (phosphorus) and 10 percent K (potassium). If your soil test indicates that the P or the K are adequate, you won't need to add these. Nitrogen moves quickly through the soil, so the recommendation will always be for 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet, (that would be 10 pounds of 10-10-10).

Another well-guarded secret is that the difference between so-called "tomato" fertilizer and that for "shrubs and trees" is negligible-those three numbers say it all. If you're in doubt, read the ingredients in the fine print.

If you want to go organic, we can steer you to organic fertilizers that will get the job done, though your plants won't know the difference. Generally, organic alternatives work more slowly, so should be incorporated into the soil well before planting.

For more information on soil testing, please give Bill or me a call! ~Chris

NC STATE Extension Master Gardener

May Garden Tips

It won't be long before the first juicy, vine-ripened tomato from your garden is in the middle of your BLT. Here are a few tips to make the too-short tomato season last a bit longer: Avoid overhead watering, but try to keep soil moisture even. This will help reduce disease problems. Soaker hoses or drip irrigation systems are good ways to achieve this without wasting water. Mulching will also help keep soil moisture even. Wait until tomatoes have set the first hand of fruit before fertilizing with 10-10-10 or other balanced fertilizer. Repeat in three weeks.

When spring-flowering shrubs have finished their show, prune where needed. If the rate of growth has been below par, but plants are in general good health, you may fertilize with a slow-release or organic fertilizer at this time

Begin fertilizing Bermudagrass lawns this month at the rate of 1 pound of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet. Reapply at this rate in June, July and August. Apply half this amount in September.

A second round of crabgrass preventer should be applied around May 15. For cool-season lawns, be sure that the product you use contains no fertilizers. These lawn grasses need to rest for the summer.

Mowing your lawn at the proper height for the type of grass is especially important as temperatures rise. Keep Bermudagrass lawns at around one inch. Fescue and fescue-bluegrass lawns should be cut no shorter than 3-1/2 inches. These heights will help maximize turf density and crowd out weeds as well as the other less desirable grass types.

Plant sweet potatoes, okra, beans, southern peas, watermelons and cantaloupes this month when soil temperatures have reached seventy degrees or higher.

Fertilize blueberries, blackberries and grapes this month. Strawberries are ready for harvest now. Visit a pick-your-own farm or buy some at the farmer's market – nothing better than strawberries fresh from the field!

Continue to plant summer-flowering bulbs in the flower border. Cannas, callas, dahlias, gladiolas, caladiums and elephant ears are a few colorful choices. Pinch out growth tips of newly-planted annuals to promote branching and make stockier plants. Continue to remove spent flowers of annuals and perennials throughout the season.

When spraying to combat insect pests, keep in mind that beneficial insects share the same plants as the bad guys. Use low-toxicity pesticides when possible and spray at dusk when the bees have all gone home. Always read and follow label directions for safe pesticide application.

Houseplants can be moved outside now. To prevent unwelcome guests from taking up residence in the pots this summer, gently remove the plant from the pot and place a piece of fine-mesh screening over the drainage holes before replacing the plant in the pot.

Arbor Gate Plant of the Month

Butterfly Weed *Asclepias tuberosa*

You may have glimpsed this tough native by the side of the road as you whizzed by. It's that splash of orange—maybe even yellow– about 12-18 inches off the ground surrounded by butterflies. Maybe it's called weed because it is a native plant that puts down roots wherever it feels like it. Or maybe just because it's a milkweed, though this member of the genus doesn't exude that milky sap when cut, as the other members of the *Asclepias* genus do. *Ascleptias tuberosa* lives up to the first part of its common name in more ways than one, feeding the larva of the monarch butterfly as well as adults of many other pollinators. In any case, this "weed" is one that you will want in your sunny, well-drained border. Don't try to transplant *Asclepias tuberosa*—the deep tap root that makes it practically drought-proof will thwart your efforts. Not to worry though, plentiful seeds in late summer will guarantee more plants by next spring. Be patient, though, this plant is slow to emerge in spring.

More good news! Like many other members of the milkweed genus, butterfly weed is not on the menu for your neighborhood deer and rabbits.

Read more here:
https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/asclepias-tuberosa/