

## Fertilizing established perennials - feed 'em and weep

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Perennials generally do not have a high fertilizer requirement and, in fact, some will react negatively to routine fertilization. An over-fertilized perennial will reward the gardener with excess growth that flops over and becomes leggy. Over-fertilization can also affect bloom performance, producing ample foliage at the expense of blooms. Many perennial experts recommend no fertilization when plants are in a healthy garden soil. However, if your soil is composed primarily of sand with little organic component, your plants will probably benefit from routine, light fertilization.

Understanding the natural growing range of your perennials will enable you to create a growing environment similar to the plant's native habitat. It is helpful to keep a watchful eye and journal of plant "behavior" in hopes to correct situations such as leggy growth and poor performance in subsequent years.

Perennials may benefit from a single fertilizer application just before or at the time that new spring growth is pushing up. The most common recommendation is *no more than* 1 pound of nitrogen per 1000 sq. ft. if no compost is used. For comparison, this is about one-fourth of what you would apply to your lawn during the course of a growing season.

**Broadcasting** a slow release fertilizer is the best choice to meet season-long plant nutrient requirements, but you can also use a balanced fertilizer such as 20-5-10. If your soil test indicates that you do not need phosphorous, choose a product such as 20-0-10.



Topdressing a perennial bed with 1 to 2 inches of compost will provide season-long fertility for most perennials.



Using a slow-release formulation, topdress perennials according to the manufacturer's label directions.

Slow release products are usually effective for either a three- to four-month window or a five- to six-month window of action. If you are topdressing or using supplemental feed at any time during the season, the three- to four-month product should work well. If you only intend on fertilizing once during the season, then the five- to six-month product should be used.

You can also use the **sidedress** method, applying several tablespoons of fertilizer (according to the manufacturer's guidelines) in the general root zone of each plant. Make sure not to allow fertilizer granules to cluster in the crown of the plants as it may cause burning. In the early spring, cool soils can have an affect on uptake of certain nutrients, at times making the foliage appear light green or yellow (nutrient deficient). If this appearance does not diminish as the season

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progresses, spot treating with liquid feed will bring about a quick green up.

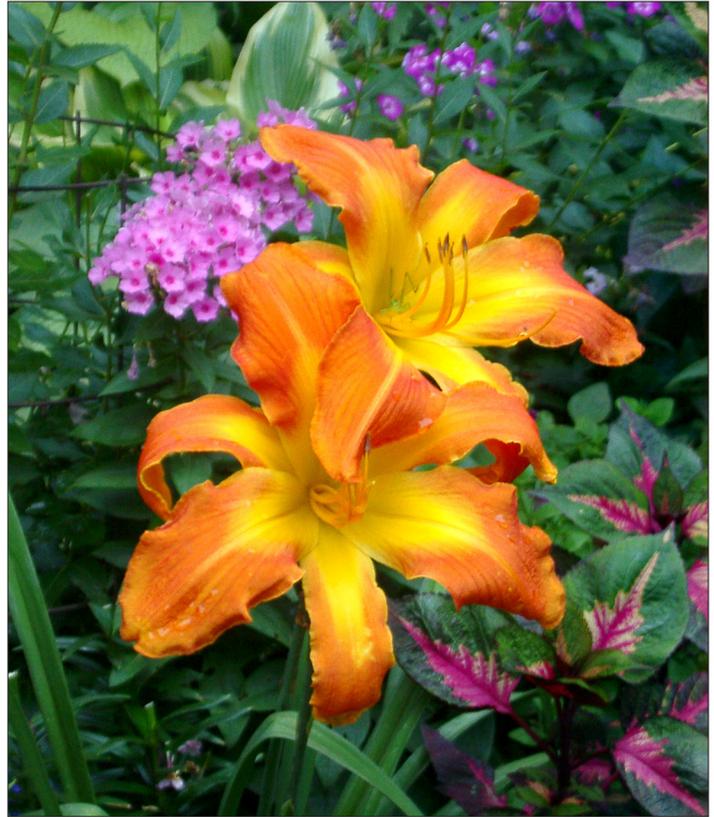
### Compost insurance

If you routinely apply a 1-inch layer of compost or leaf mold to your garden each year, you can often **eliminate fertilizing** all together. This is where having an understanding of each plant's needs and observing leaf color and growth habit will help you avoid excess fertility.

Certain perennials tend to be heavy feeders by nature. Daylilies (*Hemerocallis*), peony, *Chrysanthemum* and tall phlox will benefit not only from a spring feeding, but also with a secondary application during the summer. In this case, sidedressing with a product that has immediate availability (not slow-release) or using a liquid product is the best choice. Perennials that you cut back to the ground during the season, allowing new foliage to flush out and bloom a second time such as *Delphinium*, daisy and *Pulmonaira* will also benefit from spot treating with a liquid product.

Do not fertilizer perennials in late summer or early fall. This may cause the plants to flush out additional growth that will not harden off in time for an early winter freeze.

*Find out about other educational resources and classes at [www.migarden.msu.edu](http://www.migarden.msu.edu) and at Finneran's blog, [www.stuckongardening.com](http://www.stuckongardening.com). You can contact the MSU Master Gardener Lawn and Garden Hotline at 888-678-3464 with your questions.*



Perennials such as tall phlox and daylily (*Hemerocallis*) benefit from topdressing with fertilizer after bloom.

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