Academy Garden Club Thymes

A newsletter for the members of the Academy Garden Club of Lenox

JANUARY 2026

Horticultural Column

Fertilizers for Your House Plants

By Harriet Wetstone

Now that the holiday season is done, and it's just plain old winter, I thought I would spend some time reviewing the dos and don'ts of fertilizing my houseplants. After all, I spend enough time fussing with them. I croon to them, fondle them, pinch off the odd crumpled leaf, mist them, rearrange them. I should really add a little science to all of that!

Philobrasil

As we all know, most of you better than I, there are some essential elements to getting plants to thrive. Obviously, they need light and moisture. And they need nutrients.

Up 'till now, I have not thought about it like this: nutrients can be organized into three basic categories. There are macronutrients, secondary nutrients and micronutrients. I must say that the more I read about plant food the more I realize how complex all of this is. What follows is very general, but it might (as it did for me) whet your appetite to read more deeply!

The macro-ones are the standard NPK: nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. The ratios are always listed on the package. 10 10 10 means equal parts N, P, and K. But wait -why K and not another P? Well, the symbol for potassium is 'K' because it comes from the Neo-Latin word "kalium" which is derived from the Arabic word meaning plant ashes. Historically, potassium was derived from potash, the ashes of plants.

Nitrogen supports the growth of leafy greens and is a major component of the process of photosynthesis. Phosphorus stimulates early root and plant growth and strengthens plant material, including flowers and fruit. Potassium increases resistance to diseases, pest attacks, and climate stresses.

Begonia

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The secondary nutrients include calcium, magnesium and Sulphur. These are just as essential for plant growth as the macro nutrients, but plants need less of them. Calcium strengthens plant cell walls and membranes and as such increases plant resistance to disease. It is also essential in signaling of plant hormones which regulate a wide range of growth and development. Magnesium is an essential component of photosynthesis, that is, converting sunlight into plant energy. Sulphur plays a crucial role in the formation of plant proteins and is necessary for the production of oils, amino acids and vitamins.

Micronutrients are also essential to plant growth, but are needed in very small amounts, less than one percent of the dry weight of a plant. Iron, Copper, Zinc, Manganese, Nickel, Boron, are all micronutrients. Most of these occur in soil in trace amounts.

The plants that look so lush and gorgeous on the shelves of our favorite greenhouses, so gorgeous that we have to have them, these plants are clearly well fed. But once we get them home, and over time, they use up all those nutrients, and it is up to us to feed them.

I think the most important part of differentiating between all the many plant food options is organic and non-organic. Many commercial, nonorganic plant foods list only Nitrogen/Phosphorus/Kalium ratios, with none of the secondary and trace nutrients present.

Rhizomatous Begonia

Gardening sites commonly liken nonorganic plant food to fast food which provides a quick jolt, while organic plant food is more like a good home cooked meal. I suspect this might be an oversimplification, but it does have face value.

Organic plant food is made from living organisms, e.g. fish emulsion, worm castings, and bat guano. Organic plant foods include macro, secondary and trace nutrients. Organic plant food as opposed to synthetics, is said to improve soil, enhance water retention and support beneficial soil microbes as well as providing nutrients for the plants. Organic plant food releases nutrients more gradually as well, so there is less chance of fertilizer burning. With all plant food, however, the rule of thumb is that less is better than more, that you should never add plant food to dry soil. And that you should always read the instructions!

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