

Answer to the Question:

What kind of fertilizer should I use on my roses (Jun-1-2005)

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A common question heard every year at the April pruning session is "What kind of fertilizer should I use on my roses?" The answer is you can keep it simple or get a little exotic or do both.

With years of experimenting I have found that I get good results by side-dressing each rose bush with a layer of composted manure in the spring. Side-dressing is a fancy way of saying that the manure should be spread under the bush away from the canes. A cup of all-purpose, granular 5-10-5 fertilizer can be added by scratching carefully (so as not to damage the delicate surface roots of the plant) into the top inch of soil. The manure, being organic, is slow-acting and improves the soil, while the chemical granular fertilizer works immediately when the ground warms up to 40 degrees.

Basically, the major elements in any fertilizer is NPK (nitrogen, phosphate and potassium), which is necessary to grow a healthy plant. Nitrogen, the first number in any fertilizer ratio, is essential for lush green foliage; the second number stands for phosphate, which is responsible for the formation of the flower; the third number is potassium, which supplies energy to the root system. Therefore, 5-10-5 has 5% nitrogen, 10% phosphate and 5% potassium. After the first cycle of bloom some gardeners use 10-6-4 with the belief that 10% nitrogen produces more leaves, which a rose bush needs to produce an abundance of flowers.

At the same time, good soil is the foundation of beautiful roses, and it is absolutely necessary to continue to amend the soil with organic materials every year. Compost, leaves, horse, cow or chicken manure, alfalfa meal or seaweed are considered "gardeners' gold" because they attract a microcosm of beneficial insects that will go to work breaking down the organic materials into a rich soil. Using chemical fertilizers alone will eventually deaden the soil, so the secret is to use both.

Since hybrid tea roses are heavy feeders, it is necessary to fertilize more often, right after pruning and every month thereafter, which is essential for exhibition roses. You can start off with a granular fertilizer in April, then switch to a liquid foliar spray such as Miracle-Gro Rose Food, which can be applied with a hose-end sprayer every two weeks. Try 20-20-20 one week and two weeks later 15-30-15. You can also mix two tablespoons fish emulsion along with the Miracle-Gro. (Liquid foliar sprays are faster acting than granular fertilizers. The leaves absorb the mixture much more readily than pouring a bucket of Miracle Gro at the base of the plant and produce luscious dark green leaves.)

Shrub Roses and climbers are fertilized twice during the growing season: once in spring and again after the first flush of bloom to produce gorgeous September roses.

Common Epsom Salts is a rich source of magnesium, the central element in the green chlorophyll molecule, and helps maintain healthy foliage. It also is more than a trace element. It promotes basal breaks, a condition every gardener looks for, which is the tender canes that spring from the bud union and later mature into major canes giving the plant new life. It can be applied in spring and again in late summer.

Alfalfa meal releases a substance called triacontanol, which is a growth hormone for plants. Canes grow stronger, growth is vigorous and blossoms are rich in color. Apply alfalfa in spring and again in early August.

Always remember to water your roses the day before fertilizing. This will prevent fertilizer burn, since the leaves will be well-hydrated and ready to assimilate the fertilizer.