

Natural Fertilizers Explained

Whoever said, "everything old is new again," must have been discussing their garden.

Decomposing plant and animal life not only enriches the soil, it also provides nutrients for new plants to grow and thrive. That's the basis of organic gardening using natural fertilizers.

As organisms die, Mother Nature's natural process is to transfer the energy from the decomposition to new living organisms. Dead plants and animals naturally provide nutrients to growing plants. This decomposition also promotes the microbial life of the soil.

A symbiotic relationship exists between microorganisms found in soil and living plants. Encouraging a healthy relationship will help increase the ability of the plant roots to take in nutrients from the soil.

Understanding Natural Fertilizers

Before choosing or using natural fertilizers, there are some things that every organic garden should know.

First, it's important to understand the rating or "N-P-K" levels on the fertilizer label. This number (for example, 20-10-20) shows the levels of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium that are present in the natural fertilizers. Manufacturers and distributors are required to display this content prominently on the bottle or bag.

Nitrogen promotes leafy growth in plants. Phosphorus is the element needed for strong rooting and fruiting. Potassium benefits the overall health of the plant, and also promotes fruiting and flowering. The combination of these three macronutrients gives plants what they need to grow and thrive in your garden.

Applying Natural Fertilizers

There are several different methods for administering these vital nutrients to your soil and plants, and the application method you choose may depend upon the type of natural fertilizer you're using.

* **Top Dressing:** If the label suggests that the fertilizer be used as "top dressing", you'll add the compound to the top one to two inches of soil around the root zone of your plants. Before watering, scratch lightly or mix it in to keep the fertilizer from running off.

* **Teabag:** Another popular way of incorporating natural fertilizer is to use the teabag method. Make a healthy "brew" by combining a few tablespoons of dry fertilizer with about five gallons of water. Then, use a small air pump or similar device that will allow the mixture to oxygenate in the soil for 24 hours. This method of applying natural fertilizer leads to a substantial increase in microbial life. It can also be used to dilute the fertilizer for use while watering roots or spraying foliage.

If you're interested in using natural fertilizers in your garden, you have several options to choose from:

* **Worm Casting:** Considered to be Mother Nature's original fertilizer, worm casting is simply the excrement of common earthworms. As worms eat and excrete soil and compost, the soil becomes five times richer than its original state. The "casting" or excrement of the worms is widely used as an effective natural fertilizer for growing plants, and the worms incorporate oxygen as they work through the soil.

* **Bat Guano:** Some experts believe that excrement of bats is one of the oldest natural fertilizers used by humans. According to legend and historical facts, bat guano was so important to the Inca civilization in South America that people were sentenced to death if charged with harming a bat. The composting process of bat guano begins with fruit. Insects eat the fruit and the bats, in turn, eat the insects. As the bats rest in their caves, they drop feces onto the cave floor, where millions of guano beetles and beneficial decomposing microbes thrive. Through this complicated process, the guano is freed of any toxins, and is transformed into a wonderfully natural fertilizer for plants.

While making your own natural fertilizer is not a difficult task, it may not be very convenient. Fortunately, a good garden center will carry a selection of natural fertilizers, so that you can enjoy all the benefits nature has to offer, and continue the natural circle of life.