

Fertilizing Trees

Fertilizing Trees in the home landscape and garden just has not been a top priority for homeowners over the years. This is most likely due to the mostly hidden symptoms of 'hungry' trees. You see most Trees, even when hungry, show little sign of stress until the stress becomes severe and to the average gardener the performance of stressed trees is usually acceptable and satisfactory.

That is until you experience the performance of a well cared for and fertilized tree. Pennsylvania Pride does not sell tree fertilizer and we are not compensated in order to recommend any particular brand of fertilizer. Our motivation is simple: your success and the survival of our trees in your home landscape and that you enjoy the beauty of all trees.

Trees under stress from lack of sufficient fertilizer (nutrients or food) are much more susceptible to disease and pests in this hungry state. Insects have a natural ability to seek out trees that are weakened. In addition, trees can have a much shorter life than well cared for trees.

Signs of stress from lack of food. The simplest way to determine if your trees are under stress is to look closely at the amount of new growth the tree produces each season. Especially with container grown trees, you can expect a minimum of six inches of new growth each season, many trees should produce a new flush far beyond. Keep in mind that some trees, Dogwood and Cherries for example push out new growth later in the season than Maples or

other hardwood trees. If you noticed your tree has only produced limited new growth, this is a sure sign of being under-fertilized.

Another sign of a hungry tree may be poor foliage color during the growing season. Instead of dark green leaves we see yellowing, pale green. An overall weak appearance may also indicate that it is time to act.

When to fertilize your tree. On the nursery we fertilize once a year using a slow release fertilizer that provides food from March right through the following spring into early summer. We have this ability to do this because we also control many other important functions of growth you do not have the ability to do in the home garden. With this in mind, we never recommend fertilizing a Pennsylvania Pride tree right away when planted. We usually prefer that you wait until the fall to make your first application in most cases.

The fertilizer program suited best for the home landscape is to fertilize in both spring and fall. Spring is when the ground is workable, usually March or April for most of our clients and Fall after or near total leaf drop, usually October or November. Soil type also plays a role in application date as well. For sandy, well-drained soil you may be required to make two applications in spring, the second being in May.

Watering in the fertilizer is very important, especially during dryer times. We recommend 3" of water (as measured by rain a gauge) shortly after application to move the fertilizer to the

Fertilizing Trees

root zone and reduce any chance of damaging the plant. Although if instructions on the label are followed well, it is very unlikely to see damage on established trees. Newly planted trees are much more susceptible to over-feeding.

Where to apply fertilizer. We would prefer the fertilizer be broadcast over an area called the drip zone or the area under your trees canopy. Generally the trees root zone matches that of the foliage canopy unless the tree is an upright grower, then triple the drip zone area. It is not necessary to remove mulch or cultivate the soil for these applications although if possible, this always allows for food to become quickly available to your young trees. This has little benefit for established trees.

Keep in mind these **four stages of growth** for your trees and adjust your fertilizing habits accordingly:

Stage 1. *Newly planted.* Again we recommend Fall feeding in the planting year, avoid spring applications immediately after planting.

Stage 2. *One to two years after planting.* Generally medium rates of fertilizer are required while your tree is becoming established in both spring and fall.

Stage 3. *Three to five years after planting.* The big growth years. Your tree is well past the transplant shock, if any, and has become established well in the root zone, this allows for aggressive growth. Now is the time to fertilize aggressively at the high rate of recom-

mendations and consider three applications: early spring, mid-spring and fall.

Stage 4. *A maturing tree, five plus years after planting.* You can go back to just two applications a year, early spring and fall returning the medium rate recommendation on the fertilizer label.

What to fertilize with. Our favorite fertilizer for trees is Tree-Tone, an organic fertilizer that acts as a slow release food source for each season, spring and fall. We like the recommended rates on the label and feel the directions given for application best match ours. As well, the available plant food in the product is at safe levels so the risk of any damage is all but eliminated. This product is available at most fine Garden Centers in our area. In addition, this product provides beneficial microbes to support soil life and balance naturally. [Click here to read more about Tree-Tone and other Espoma Products.](#)

Listen, we understand fertilizing may cause some concern, our intention with the information we have provided is to encourage you to fertilize your trees each year, twice a year. We wholeheartedly suggest you take the first step and visit your local Garden Center today and begin your fall application right away. You will be pleased with results next spring.

- Don Eaton
Pennsylvania Pride Grow Team