

Fertilizing annuals

*Keep your annuals in bloom—
ing health with sun, water
and fertilizer.*

By NANCY STAIRS/ technical editor

Anuals are a staple of the urban landscape. Their lives, however brief, are very productive. They bloom from the time they are mature until frost. In areas of no or mild winters (zones 8 to 24) some annuals will continue to bloom throughout the winter.

The key to a productive annual planting is to keep the plants growing steadily with water and fertilizer, and removing dead blooms.

Most annuals prefer full sun and well-drained soil, although there are some annuals which actually do better in relatively infertile soil, such as cosmos, gazania, nasturtium, portulaca and poppies.

When planting annuals, it is a common practice to mix fertilizer into the soil prior to planting. Incorporating fertilizer into the soil before installation helps the plants become established and produce flowers. At establishment, a complete fertilizer with a lower percentage of nitrogen and potassium and higher percentage of phosphorus can be mixed into the top two inches of soil. This initial application will generally provide sufficient nutrients for the first half of the growing season. However, a mid-season application of fertilizer will not only benefit the plants but will also extend the flowering period, with the annuals continuing to grow and bloom through the remainder of the season.

Soil that has been enriched with a good composting mixture will not generally need additional fertilizer throughout the growing season as the release of nutrients will be slower. However the compost may not provide the initial boost to the plants at the time of planting and the addition of a fertilizer product may be appropriate.

Post-planting feeding

If you don't incorporate a granular fertilizer into the soil before planting, give the plants an application of a complete fertilizer about two weeks after planting. A second application can be done about six weeks later and in warmer zones a third application may be appropriate another 6-8 weeks later.

When applying fertilizer the plants should not be limp and the soil should not be dry. Water thoroughly the day before and again after fertilizing.

Using a liquid fertilizer throughout the season is another option. This method of application is more expensive and must be applied more often, due to the fact that liquid applications are leached through the soil more quickly than dry applications. Follow the manufacturers directions, applying as often as every seven days to four weeks. Like granular fertilizers the proportion of phosphorus should be higher than the nitrogen and potassium.

Slow release fertilizers such as plastic-

sulfur-coated urea and others have potential for fertilizing annual beds. These materials are useful where you will not or cannot fertilize after planting. Generally, they last from 4 to 12 months in the soil. However, slow-release fertilizers are more expensive although they may reduce labor costs. Once these materials have been applied you have given up control of the fertilization program and, thereby, plant growth rates. You can choose to apply an immediate-release fertilizer mid-way through the season to boost flowering but that would make the increased expense of slow release fertilizers unnecessary. Keep in



This beautiful border of annuals will retain its vibrant color and health for months provided it receives sufficient moisture and the proper nutrition at the proper times.

mind that coated fertilizers may release more quickly when they are applied to the surface rather than lightly incorporated into the soil. This may be due to cracking of the plastic coat caused by higher temperatures or fluctuating moisture levels and UV light.

In general, most annuals don't require a lot of fertilizer and a couple of applications during the growing season are sufficient. Over-fertilizing will cause a buildup of soluble salts in the soil, especially if the soil is heavy, and can damage the plants. Thorough watering can help leach these salts away from the root zone to reduce future damage. When slow-release materials are used, excessive salts cannot be leached out since additional water increases fertilizer release.

Don't forget that removing dead blooms and seed heads will also go a long way in prolonging flower production of your annuals. **LM**

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