

# Feed ME!

There is something about that day in late August when you sense that spring is on its way. The sun feels warmer and there is a gentle breeze through the garden. Nature senses it too and it is usually at this point you notice that the first blossoms are just about to open, the spring bulbs are in their full glory and the garden is coming out of its winter slumber.

The subtle change in light and temperature tells plants to put on growth, flower and reproduce. And to do this well your plants need feeding.

Plant food (fertilisers) contain three essential elements in varying amounts. They are Nitrogen (N), Phosphorus (P) and Potassium (K).

Nitrogen is essential element for leaf growth and chlorophyll. Two distinct signs of a plant lacking in nitrogen are yellow leaves and stunted growth.

Phosphorus is essential for strong roots, flowering and setting fruit. If a plant does not get enough phosphorus it may not flower or fruit.

Potassium is important for strong cells, production of chlorophyll and the movement of water in a plant. Low potassium can result in weak plants that are more susceptible to pests and diseases.

## Organic versus inorganic fertilisers

Fertilisers can be organic (naturally occurring products, manures) or inorganic (manufactured chemicals). The organic fertilisers have the advantage of supplying microorganisms to the soil which can benefit the structure of the soil. Traditionally they are the 'smelly' option to use in the garden.



The inorganic fertilisers have a highly controlled N:P:K ratio and are often marketed as feed for specific types of plants, e.g. roses. Inorganic fertilisers are also available as slow release formulations which are great if you don't want to feed your plants so often or if you are leaving the garden or pot plants unattended for a period of time.

## Feeding native plants

The Australian soil has relatively low nutrient levels, particularly phosphorus. Many Australian native plants, especially the banksias and grevilleas, have adapted over time to grow in low nutrient soil. Feeding natives with a traditional fertiliser that contains phosphorus can be quite detrimental and can kill some native species. Use a fertiliser that is specifically manufactured for natives to avoid this issue.

## How much and when?

As a general rule of thumb, plants should be fed during the growing/flowering/fruiting seasons. For most plants this will be spring and summer. Generally plants do not grow during winter and feeding at this time of the year is unnecessary. If in doubt, follow the instructions on the pack or talk to your local nursery staff.

Happy gardening!



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