

Feeding your Plants & Home made Fertilisers

Caring for your soil in general, is important, which is one reason why making your own compost to add to improve your soil is so great. Other options for helping the health of your soil include applications of farmyard manure, seaweed, wood ash, and planting green manures. Healthy soil means healthy plants – and more abundant and nutritious vegetables!

As a general rule of thumb for feeding your plants, plants at the fruiting stage will need potash rich feeds (e.g. comfrey, nettle soups, seaweed) and plants producing “greenery” will need nitrogen rich feeds (e.g. manure).

Homemade fertiliser is of course organic and the best for your plants. When your fruit trees are just about to fruit or when your vegetables are just sprouting, your plants will appreciate the extra bit of food you are giving to them. All you need is a container that holds water. The size of the container depends on the size of your land and the amount of vegetables you are growing. A small area only needs something like a 5 litre bottle whereas a large area can have a bath! There are many ingredients you may wish to consider, ranging from nettle leaves, comfrey leaves, wood ash, sheep droppings, urine and seaweed. You can add many of these directly onto the soil as they are, or you can create a liquid feed, which may be rather smelly, but makes it easier for the plants to absorb the nutrients.

Wood ash

Wood ash from a bonfire, woodstove or fireplace (but not coal or charcoal) adds potassium and some phosphorus, and usually has about a 0-1-3 (N-P-K) ratio. Ash is rich in calcium and potassium, which are vital to healthy and strong plant growth.

Manure

Well-rotted manures from organically-raised cows, horses, and chickens can add nutrients to garden soil. Be sure not to apply manure and lime at the same time, which will create ammonia gas and waste beneficial nitrogen. Cover your manure, and leave it to “ripen.” Wear rubber gloves when handling fresh manure. Don't put fresh manure around growing plants.

It's possible to have perfectly healthy soil without the addition of animal materials. Recent E. coli outbreaks traced to commercially-produced vegetables have led many organic gardeners to avoid the use of animal manures.

Poultry Manure Fertiliser

If you are a backyard poultry keeper, the chances are that you already benefit from the addition of poultry manure and bedding in your compost heaps. However, have you considered making a liquid organic fertiliser from poultry manure? All you need to do is collect together around half a bucket or container full of poultry manure, and then fill the remaining half with water. Leave to 'stew' for around 3 or 4 weeks before using. This concentrate will need to be diluted - for every half a litre of concentrate, you'll need to add 10 litres of water.

Organic Fertilisers

If you don't have enough compost, or your soil needs a lot of a particular nutrient, organic fertilisers may be your best bet. Organic fertilisers include plant-based products such as seaweed meal, and animal-based products such as blood, fish, and bone meal. The UK Soil Association does not recommend using seaweed or peat for ecological reasons.

Urine

Every day, gardeners across the world flush away a valuable and sustainable source of fertilizer for their plants - urine. Urine is a good source of nitrogen and other minerals and, providing it is used correctly, is completely safe. Using urine as a fertilizer saves money, fossil fuels (used extensively in the production of chemical fertilizers) and water (no need to flush!).

- Keep it separate. The golden rule with urine use is to keep it separate from other bodily wastes. Urine is clean and needs to be kept that way.
- Use it fresh. We all know that stale urine smells. That's ammonia, and it's made from nitrogen. The smellier your collected urine, the less nutritious it will be for your plants, as well as being unpleasant to apply.
- Always dilute. Urine is too strong to be used neat on plants. Dilute at least 5:1, and it can be diluted up to 10:1 for use on tender plants and seedlings.

Nettle / Comfrey Liquid Manure

Nettle / comfrey liquid manure is an organic and free plant feed which can be easily made in any garden. All you need is a container (preferably with a lid, as this gets smelly) some young nettles and / or comfrey leaves and some water. Nettles have deep roots and as they grow, they bring up trace elements from the deeper soil which are essential to plant health but which are often lacking in regularly cropped top soil.



Plastic bin with homemade comfrey fertiliser or "tea"

The liquid manure can be started in the spring when the young nettles begin to appear and can be continued throughout the summer and early autumn to give a valuable plant/soil feed throughout the main growing seasons. It is a good idea to contain the leaves in a mesh of some kind, so that when you come to use the fertiliser (which will need to be diluted) you don't clog up the rose of your watering can with rotted down solid bits of plant.

Other good plants to add are borage and green leafy vegetables such as beetroot leaves and Swiss chard. When the water begins to evaporate over time, just add more

water as you need to. Add more plant cuttings every three months. If you have a large garden its great to have a designated area for nettles and comfrey. If not, nettles are readily available for free in woods, parks and disused areas. Avoid picking them from by the roadside because of pollution.

The liquid manure takes about three to four weeks to 'mature' - and it does 'mature' to give a fairly earthy smell, so you may want to place the container somewhere out of the way.

More nettles & comfrey and, if necessary, water can be added to the container throughout the season.

Other references: For detailed fact sheet about comfrey, please see:
<http://www.allotment.org.uk/vegetable/comfrey/comfrey.PDF>