



Johnson's Garden Talk

Lawn and garden information for the friends and customers of Johnson's Garden Centers

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Johnson's Nursery News ... Time to Feed Trees and Shrubs

Jeremy Johnson, Johnson's Nursery Buyer, Kansas Certified Nurseryman

Trees and shrubs ... like humans ... require nutrients to live and thrive. When these plants are not given proper nutrition, they are susceptible to insect and disease problems, and do not grow as they normally should. Proper fertilization of landscape plants can actually help to fight off many problems before they arise.

Fall is the ideal time for fertilization of our landscape plants. This theory goes back hundreds of years to when the plants lived in the wild. In the fall, when deciduous trees lost their leaves, the leaves were broken down on the forest floor, providing beneficial nutrients to the root systems of the trees. Since we are not able to replicate nature's forest setting on our own landscapes, we must add supplemental nutrients.

To begin looking at fertilization, we need to do a little thinking first. Tree roots spread minimally to the "dripline" (edge of the branches) of the plant, and can actually spread 2-3 times this width in an established plant. Many people also think that tree roots only go straight down, as in a tap root. This tap root helps to anchor the tree, but the majority of feeder roots are actually in the top 18" of soil under the base of the tree extending outward towards (and sometimes past) the dripline. Now that the basic science lesson is over, we can look at fertilizing our plants. There are many different methods of fertilizing trees and shrubs, some providing more benefit than others. At Johnson's, we carry several easy-to-apply fertilizers for landscape plants.

One good method, if applied properly, of getting fertilizer to the roots of the tree is by using a root feeder. You are probably familiar with the spike that is attached to a hose, with food tablets inserted inside. The food in this case is a water soluble tablet that deep-feeds the roots of the tree. One caution is to make sure you use this application method under the drip line as instructed on the package. You will need to use quite a few holes to fertilize a large tree, so this method, while seemingly easy at first, can become a daunting task once you start.

Another popular method is tree spikes. These are about 6" solid fertilizer stakes that are hammered into the ground around a tree. Based on the little lesson above, we know that roots extend from the plant in no particular fashion, so by using one of these, you may not be getting the proper fertilizer to your plants. While these can be an OK choice in some cases, large trees often require many stakes to provide the right amount of fertilizer.

My favorite, and by far the easiest, way to fertilize is with granular ferti•lome Tree & Shrub Food. This product is applied by filling a broadcast spreader with food, and simply walking around the base and dripline of the tree. Tree & Shrub Food has an added wetting agent so the food is carried deep into the soil, reaching the feeder roots of the tree. Once all of the food has been applied (which can be done by hand as well), you simply water everything in.

Whether you have never fertilized, or do it religiously every year, now is the time to get it done. If you have any other questions, our staff at all three stores will be very happy to assist you, or you can e-mail me at jeremyj@johnsonsgarden.com.