

Spring Feeding Frenzy

by Jolene Adams

Once your roses break dormancy and begin to leaf out, they're ravenous. The prompt application of fertilizer and organics in the spring will help them start growing strongly and setting out shoots and roots for another growing season. Remember to water well before you feed anything to your roses. You want them to be full of water - never thirsty!

Organics First

Organics help start soil activity. Organic ingredients actually get the micro-flora and -fauna in the soil ready for action. Feeding the micro-organisms and building up their numbers will jump start your roses too! Once your soil is in good shape, nice and loose and friable with plenty of humus mixed in, you're ready to add nutrients. These organic additives could be a combination of cottonseed meal, fish meal, blood meal or additional humus like composted manure. Worked into the surface of the soil they'll start the activity needed to feed your roses.

Work your soil so it is loose, add as much organic material as you can get your hands on. I mix a 1/2 wheelbarrow of the garden soil with 1/4 bag of potting soil and 1/4 bag of aged poultry manure, liberally laced with alfalfa pellets, redwood compost and shredded leaves or spoiled hay and all mixed together before I dump it back into the ground and water it all.

After the bed has been allowed to sit for awhile and mellow, I then plant my roses.

Liquids

Infants eat liquids first, then move on to solids. Roses can do this too! One method of feeding in the spring is to add some organic liquid food "formulas." The easiest of these is alfalfa tea, made with the unsweetened alfalfa pellets available at most feed stores. Manure tea is another good food additive for the rose beds. The advantage of the liquid is that the minerals and organics in it are already dissolved or finely suspended as microscopic particles. The soil organisms can start working on them right away, and some of the inorganics dissolved in the brew can readily be absorbed by growing rose roots. A little brew poured around each rose bush starts the chain reaction of converting fertilizer into useable feed for your roses.

Solid Food

Moving to solid food is the next step. A top dressing of manure and mulch on your spring rose beds provides a warm blanket that will slowly break down and be incorporated by those actively growing micro-organisms you have stimulated. The earth worms should be having a field day by now! In fact, the organics you have now applied, plus some basic minerals found in all plant foods will feed your roses right into summer. Bear in mind that it takes roughly 3-4 weeks for the organics to start working in your garden. That's why you add them first.

Fertilizers

Chemical fertilizers are the 'minerals' your roses need in order to grow strong healthy canes and bright, fragrant flowers. Bags and boxes of this inexpensive stuff are still marked with the standard percentage measurements of Nitrogen, Phosphorous, and Potassium. These are the 'big three' that are so necessary for plant growth. They will be denoted as "N", "P" and "K". They will usually be combined with trace elements that promote cell and root growth, such as boron, chlorine, copper and iron. Remember that for any rose food to work, it must be broken down by those busy little micro-organisms and turned into minerals. Rose food that is already broken down only has to be dissolved and the micro-organisms can then process it quickly.

A spring feeding formula that would be practical for roses is one with a ratio of 1-2-1. In other words, twice as much phosphorous in relation to nitrogen and potassium. On the fertilizer bag it should read as 5-10-5 or 10-20-10 for example.

Trace Elements

These are the 'not-so-important' minerals that are added because the rose really does need them, but in very small amounts. The trace elements (calcium, magnesium, sulphur, iron, zinc, manganese, copper, cobalt, boron, chlorine and molybdenum) are usually included in the fertilizer if it is advertised as a 'complete' plant food. You can also buy them separately, and add them per package directions for spring feeding your roses.

Time Capsules

Another popular way to feed your roses is to use a 'slow release' fertilizer that releases the nutrients into your rose garden over a prolonged period, anywhere from 30 to 90 to 120 days or more. If you use these, pick the right time period so that you don't overrun the dates when you should be decreasing fertilizers in your rose garden, like September or October in the cold zones. New growth triggered by these fertilizers is not what you want when the weather is turning cold.

Foliar Feeding

Roses like to take a bath too! And washing off the leaves during the growing season can be beneficial. Bugs and insect eggs, along with dust, mildews and molds can be washed off early in the morning, and the rose gets a chance to soak up some needed moisture. Liquid fertilizers can be added to the water and the roses can get a weekly meal as you water them!

Brand New Babies

If you're planting new bare root roses this spring, be sure to add the organics and soil amendments to get their beds ready to go, but hold off fertilizing them until after the first flush of bloom. Then treat them just like the rest of your roses. Why? Because their new growth is very tender. And they are growing so fast they will soak up fertilizer while it is still concentrated before it is properly broken down, risking burned edges on the new, delicate leaves. Once they've toughened up, feed them as already outlined.

A well fed rose is a happy rose, and a happy rose will fight off pests without flinching, stand up to heat and cold, and produce a multitude of healthy leaves and blooms for your garden.