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Out on a Limb: Tree Care Tips for the Tampa Bay Region

Quote

'Mature trees can benefit from application of certain fertilizers in instances where there is a deficiency. However, simply adding fertilizer around otherwise healthy mature trees may not accomplish anything'. Dr. Ed Gilman

Many trees found in our managed Florida landscapes are able to scavenge for sufficient plant nutrients from the soil due to their extensive root systems and need no additional fertilizer. They may also have access to plant nutrients applied as fertilizer to the lawn, shrubs, and garden. Some species such as hollies, crape myrtle, maples, Chinese elms and others appear yellow and chlorotic in some circumstances unless fertilized. These trees can benefit from regular fertilization, at least until established.

The addition of any soil nutrient is recommended only if soil or plant foliage tests indicate a deficiency. Trees and shrubs that need fertilization to stimulate more robust and vigorous growth include those exhibiting pale green, undersized leaves and reduced growth rates and those in declining condition (e.g. dead branch tips, dieback) resulting from insect attacks or disease problems.

Use the [University of Florida Tree Nutrient Deficiency Key](#) to help you identify nutrient deficiency problems.

Trees and shrubs which should not be fertilized include:

1. newly planted specimens;
2. those with severe root damage from recent trenching or construction

(The root systems of these trees will need to re-establish themselves before fertilizers can be applied without damage to the tree's health.); and

3. Established trees (>3 yrs old) generally **do not** need to be fertilized routinely.

A common cause of nutrient problems in the Tampa Bay Watershed is high pH (alkaline) soils, which can lead to chronic deficiencies of nutrients in some tree species. Testing your soil for pH levels is simple. Check with your local UF/IFAS Extension office for information on how to submit soil samples for testing or go to <http://soilslab.ifas.ufl.edu/ESTL%20Home.asp> for online information on soil testing.

How And When To Fertilize

Fertilizers are labeled to indicate proportions of available nutrients. For example, a label showing a 20-5-5 formulation indicates 20% nitrogen (N), 5% phosphorus (P), and 5% potassium (K). A 50 pound bag of 20% nitrogen fertilizer contains 10 pounds of actual nitrogen ($50 \times .20 = 10$).

The following general recommendations apply to trees and shrubs needing a fertilization program. Soil and foliage test results may indicate more specific nutrient requirements.

If needed, the best time to fertilize trees in west central Florida is mid-March and late September. Do not use fertilizer containing herbicides ('weed and feed'), such as those formulated for use on lawns. A complete fertilizer with a formulation 15-5-10 or 15-5-15 of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) is generally recommended.

Fertilizer application rates are based upon the area occupied by the roots. Roots spread well beyond the branches on established trees and shrubs; therefore, the area beneath the plant to be fertilized should be 1.5 times the diameter of the crown radius (see image on last page). For groups of plants, estimate the surface area underneath the entire planting to be fertilized. The recommended fertilizer should be spread evenly across the soil surface at a rate of approximately 1 lbs of nitrogen per 1,000 sq feet of soil surface.

Soil Testing

Check with your local UF/IFAS Extension office for information on how to submit soil samples for testing or go to <http://soilslab.ifas.ufl.edu/ESTL%20Home.asp> for online information on soil testing.

Please send in your questions and I will answer them via email or in upcoming issues of this newsletter.

Send your favorite tree picture and I will try to use it in the newsletter.

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The webinar:

'Designing Urban Rights-of-Way to Prevent Damage from Tree Roots'

was recorded and can be viewed at:

<https://youtu.be/mBMcirnGJEA>

