

Understanding N-P-K Fertilizer Numbers

Deciding which fertilizer to use can be a bit overwhelming, but with a bit of knowledge you can be sure your garden will get the right amount of nutrients it needs. The first question you'll need to answer is, "What analysis do I need?" The analysis is actually the three numbers you see usually at the middle or bottom of fertilizer packages (10-20-10.) These numbers represent the percentages of the three major nutrients plants need; nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium (N, P and K for short.)

Nitrogen, represented by the first number, provides plants with lush green foliage growth. For example, use a high nitrogen fertilizer for a lush green lawn, though you may need to mow more often! The second number represents phosphorus, which aids in root development and flowering ability and size. Many companies will market high phosphorus fertilizers as "bloom boosters." Potash is represented by the third number in the N-P-K sequence. This helps guard a plant from disease and insects, as well as temperature extremes and drought.

Plants also require the correct pH level (the relative amount of hydrogen in a substance) to control how they utilize the nutrients available to them. Some plants, like azaleas and evergreens, need a low pH level (acid) in the soil. In contrast, sedums and lavenders need high pH (alkaline) soils.

Experienced gardeners can usually tell what a plant needs just by its appearance. However, the only true way to tell what your soil and plants need is by a soil analysis. Understanding this, and N-P-K numbers on fertilizer packaging will go a long way toward getting your garden looking its best! Remember, more information and soil tests are available here at Iowa Outdoor Products. Just ask!