

Fertilizers 15

When temperatures are in the triple digits, very few garden plants look their best. Between heat, humidity levels that hover around one or two percent, and our usual daunting growing conditions, it is no wonder that things can appear peaked. With the exception of true desert or desert-adapted plants, most of our landscape will stop growing when it is hotter than 85 to 90 degrees. They must continue to take up water, but they will not produce the lush growth we crave in our gardens.

This is obviously not something that most gardeners welcome, but after a few decades in the Mojave Desert, they have come to expect it. Until new gardeners become experienced with this challenging environment, they sometimes try to remedy the problem, with poor results.



The first remedy is to water heavily. If the problem is due to drought, irrigation is critical. If the situation is not actually a water issue, then adding more will probably not improve the situation. Unless the soil is very well drained, adding much more could even add to the problem.

Occasionally people will blame insects, particularly aphids, and begin spraying with products that will wipe out those pests for a little while. Unfortunately, aphids blow in, reproduce and renew their population in a short time. What many insecticides do kill successfully includes butterflies and bees, both important pollinators. The chemical residues of these powerful pesticides can remain active for months, or even longer. All over the United States, people are becoming concerned about the loss of our pollinators, especially since a large fraction of our food is a direct result of these beneficial insects.

Adding fertilizers is another “remedy” that is not terribly helpful when the problem is an environmental one. While soil fertility is crucial for plant health, simply putting down “plant food” cannot do the job.

This may seem counter-intuitive; plants need nutrients, right?

Yes, but they do not need the same nutrients at all times, and soluble fertilizers can cause the local soil to become even saltier than it is already. Whenever using a soluble fertilizer in summer, make it as dilute as possible to cut down on salinity problems.

Do plants need fertilizers? The answer is “Maybe”. Plants get most of their nutrients from the soil. Here in the desert, some nutrients tend to be deficient, in particular, nitrogen. There are three major nutrients listed on the label of all fertilizers. The first number on the container is the percentage of nitrogen in the product; the second will be phosphorus, and the third, potassium.

Nitrogen is part of every protein, in every life form, so it is not something to ignore. It is also essential for green tissue, like leaves. If applied during the heat of the summer, unfortunately, it can push a plant into more growth than it can successfully maintain at that time. Fertilizing flowering or fruiting plants with extra nitrogen can actually cause flowers or fruits to abort. The result can be a pepper or a melon plant with many lush leaves and no fruit.

Dr. Angela O'Callaghan is the Social Horticulture Specialist for University of Nevada Cooperative Extension. Contact ocallaghana@unce.unr.edu or 702-257-5581.