

Fertilize Bulbs Before Bloom

Spring-flowering bulbs are beginning to poke up through the soil. So, gardeners should be getting the fertilizer ready. These bulbs' roots are most active when their foliage first emerges. That's when they can make the best use of the nutrients that will help them produce flowers next year.

If gardeners wait too long, they'll waste time and fertilizer. Research has found that when these plants flower, their roots start to die. This shuts off the route fertilizer needs to reach the bulb.

A soil test is the only sure way to know what nutrients bulbs are craving. Blood meal is the classic, applied at a rate of 2 pounds per 100 square feet or 1 teaspoon per square foot. Turf fertilizers such as a 27-3-3 or 30-3-3 can be used, but cut the rate by a third.

Remember to leave the foliage until it dies naturally. Keep in mind that after flowering, the plant needs the green leaves to manufacture food (photosynthesis) that is stored in the bulb for next year's growth. If the foliage is removed early, the plant can no longer manufacture nutrient reserves for next year. This results in a small, weak bulb which will gradually decline, reducing blooms.

Wyandotte County Extension provides a lawn and garden soil testing service through Kansas State University.

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