

Tree Talk

Do Your Trees Need Fertilizer?

Unlike the popular belief, not all trees need supplemental fertilizer to grow and remain healthy. If you look at all the forests around the United States, they have been able to grow and thrive for thousands of years without people adding fertilizer. The forest floor is full of leaf matter and other organic matter that are always breaking down, adding nutrients back into the soil for the trees to take up. The only difference is that most of South Dakota is prairie, not forests.



When fertilizing trees, I normally recommend using a standard granular grass fertilizer. Typically you should apply a fertilizer that is higher in nitrogen and lower in phosphorus and potassium. Spread the granular fertilizer in a large area to assure that a large percentage of the tree's root system will have access to it. A tree's root system will spread out further than the tree is tall. This is a much more effective way to fertilize trees rather than using spikes that only focus on a very small portion of the trees root system.

If you decide that your trees require fertilizer whether it be from a soil or foliage test or by the recommendation of a professional, the best time to apply it is after the first hard frost in the fall. By doing this, you are preparing your trees to take advantage of it the following spring. The second best time to fertilize would be very early in the spring.

A good layer of organic mulch and frequently watering your tree is many times all they require to grow well. Three or four inches of a organic wood chip mulch spread out at least 3-4 feet around young trees and more on older trees, making sure to keep the mulch from touching the trunk will give your trees a much needed boost by keeping the soil cool, holding moisture in the soil and adding nutrients back into the soil.

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