

Felder Rushing

Poor roses, poor tomatoes, being starved by folks who think gimmicky home-made fertilizer solutions make much difference!

Internet sites where gardeners gather are buzzing with misinformation, much based on overblown myths spread by experts who repeat feel-good memes without digging into actual research to ensure they are accurate. Though usually started with a grain of truth, however sketchy or taken out of context, many have been debunked for decades.

Far be it for me to try stopping anyone from following their own hopeful bliss, as long as it is not actually harmful. But, while being open-minded and always relieved to learn anything new, I dig deep when seeking horticultural truths.

Not going to get into easy stuff like planting marigolds and aromatic herbs to repel garden pests and mosquitoes, planting by the moon yielding better crops, grits to kill fire ants, purple martins eating mosquitoes, nandina berries killing birds, or goldenrod causing allergies. None of which is true enough to make a whit of difference.

Yes, just like truly wanting to believe the groundhog in February, in spite of wishing otherwise, I am very sure of all this and can back it with real evidence based on replicated science and decades of observation. I'm just not going to argue with folks who swear otherwise.

Just as I knew better than raise my kids on healthy lettuce alone, when it comes to providing plants with the nutrients they need to grow well, let's stick mostly with what they actually need.

Plant growth requires certain elements, mostly nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium, and to a lesser amount of calcium, iron, zinc, copper, magnesium and a handful of others. As anyone who has not fed their potted rubber tree or azaleas for years can attest, they can grow a long time without these essential nutrients, but nowhere near what they could, or should do. Meanwhile they are susceptible to all sorts of problems they could normally fend off.

Commercial fertilizers usually contain varying amounts of the first three, but because phosphorous



STARVING ROSES WITH KINDNESS

and potassium last a long time, only nitrogen needs to be applied every year; adding more just causes buildup and problems. I have seen all this firsthand from years of testing soils for MSU Extension Service.

Best to use a fertilizer with all three every two or three years, and a mostly short-lived nitrogen type the other times. No need for specific numbers, just follow the concept, and don't overdo it. And keep in mind that

though there are huge benefits in feeding soil overall with microbe-rich compost, manure, and other soil amendments and nutrient-rich organic fertilizers, plants absorb nutrients, even the carbon and oxygen in

water, on a molecular level, and cannot tell whether you use synthetic (chemical) or all-natural. Really.

All that said, and knowing some folks swear otherwise based on anecdotal experience, it is a fact that bone meal alone is not a complete bulb food. Epsom salts, banana peels, coffee grounds and teas made from all those things are not magical, do very little on their own to actually help plants. It takes eggshells years of being exposed to soil acids (or soaked in vinegar) to release calcium in a plant-useful form.

To release their relatively small amount of useful nutrients, they all have to be broken down in soil or compost, which can take months. Rather than use directly, just dig them in, and they will eventually work.

Meanwhile, your plants need help, and depend on you to get it to them in the amounts and forms they can actually use. Don't starve them with too-easy DIY myths.

Felder Rushing is a Mississippi author, columnist, and host of the "Gestalt Gardener" on MPB Think Radio. Visit his blog at felderrushing.blog. Email gardening questions to rushingfelder@yahoo.com.

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