

A Simple Formula For Fertilising Vegetable Beds

By John Ditchburn (Ditchy), Urban Food Garden <http://www.urbanfoodgarden.org/>

I have found that most food gardeners do not measure the amount of fertiliser they put on their vegetable beds, which means they often over or under fertilise them. To take the guesswork out of applying fertiliser I use this simple formula.

FERTILISER APPLICATION RATES PER SQUARE METRE							
CATEGORIES	BASE FERTILISER RATES			EXTRA FERTILISER RATES			
	Animal manure	Blood & bone	Compost	Chicken manure	NPK fertiliser	lime or wood ash	Liquid fertiliser
BASE FERTILISER	1 shovelful	2 handfuls	1 shovelful				
EXTRA CHICKEN MANURE	3/4 shovelful	2 handfuls	1 shovelful	2 handfuls			
EXTRA NPK FERTILISER	1/2 shovelful	2 handfuls	1 shovelful		1/2 handful NPK		
EXTRA FOR PLANTS THAT PREFER MORE ALKALI SOIL	0 to 1/2 shovelful	3 to 4 handfuls	1 shovelful		1/2 handful NPK	2 handfuls	
EXTRA FOR NUTRIENT HUNGRY PLANTS	1 shovelful	2 handfuls	1 shovelful				every 2 weeks

Estimating the area

To be able to apply the right amount of fertiliser you need to know how big the area is that you are fertilising and the best way to do that is to divide your beds into uniform sections. The best measurement for a uniform section is a square metre as most fertiliser application rates in gardening books are based on this measurement. If need be use a measuring tape to check your estimate the first time you apply fertiliser so you get a feel for what is a square metre but after that you should be able to do it by sight.

Basic fertiliser application rate

My basic fertiliser application rate is a shovelful of animal manure (sheep, cow or horse), a shovelful of well-rotted compost and two handfuls of blood and bone per square metre of bed.

Extra fertiliser application rates

While the basic fertiliser application rate is normally enough sometimes it is helpful to add extra fertilisers

and other additives to ensure that you have healthy vegetables.



A standard shovelful of sheep manure.

EXTRA CHICKEN MANURE

Add a couple of handfuls of dynamic lifter (pelletised chicken manure) or well-rotted chicken manure per square metre, but when I do this I use less animal manure.

EXTRA NKP FERTILISER

Another option is to add some NKP (nitrogen N), phosphorus P and potassium K) fertiliser but only at about half the rate recommended on the packet. A full rate is usually around 50 grams per square metre but when I use NKP fertiliser I apply no more than 25 grams per square metre. If you add NKP fertiliser then use less animal manure.



A handful of NPK fertiliser. The average human hand holds about 70 grams of this fertiliser.

A useful extra additive is rock dust as it has trace minerals in it essential to plant health. You don't need much, just a couple of pinches per square metre.

EXTRA FOR VEGETABLES THAT LIKE MORE ALKALI SOILS

Add two handfuls of garden lime, dolomite or sieved wood ash per square metre to make the soil more alkali. As animal manure is acidic use little or no animal manure, replacing it with more blood and bone or NKP fertiliser.

Vegetables that prefer more alkali soil include beans, broad beans, broccoli, Brussels sprouts, cabbage and cauliflower.

EXTRA FOR NUTRIENT HUNGRY PLANTS

Vegetables such as capsicum and celery do much better if given a fertiliser boost at regular intervals during their growth. For these vegetables I water them with a diluted liquid fertiliser solution about once a fortnight. I also give a liquid fertiliser boost to any vegetables that don't appear to be thriving and all newly planted seedlings.



Bags of dolomite and garden lime. Dolomite is slower acting and is pH neutral, which means it cannot raise the pH of your soil higher than 7.0. Garden lime is faster acting but it is not pH neutral so if enough is applied it will push the pH of your soil above 7.0. PH is a figure expressing the acidity or alkalinity of soil on a logarithmic scale on which 7.0 is neutral.

The tub next to the bags contains sieved wood ash from my fireplace. Wood ash can be used as a substitute for lime as it is also quite alkali.