A Word on Fertilizer…by Connie Kratzke

My personal opinion on fertilizing trees is that it is often more of a perceived need than an actual one. Our local soils are generally quite rich with nutrients and conducive to growing healthy plants. Most of the tree/nutrient issues I have observed are the result of excessively high or low pH levels. Extreme pH levels can prevent trees from being able to take up and utilize existing nutrients. In our area, soils tend to be fairly limey or alkaline. Therefore, the most prevalent nutrient deficiency symptom we see is iron chlorosis. When trees can’t absorb iron, their leaves turn yellow but the veins within them stay green. Supplemental iron and/or ammonium nitrate can be used to correct this issue. However, the best way to prevent it from occurring is to test your soil before planting. If the pH is high (7 or higher) you can either amend the soil with peat moss and soil sulfur, or choose trees that will thrive under existing conditions. The latter is always preferable, since soil pH levels tend to revert back to their inherent state in time.

Generally speaking, it is best to wait to fertilize newly planted trees until they have been in the ground for a season. Sometimes, chemical fertilizers can burn fine roots that develop soon after trees are planted. I always recommend slow-release, pelletized products that can be evenly distributed on top of the ground, over the entire root system. They feed gradually over an extended period. Therefore, it is important to get these formulations on the ground right away, after the leaves unfurl in the spring. Fertilizer spikes are probably the second best option. They just don’t distribute the nutrients as evenly. I do not recommend using instant-release, water soluble fertilizers like Miracle Gro. They work much better on veggies and annuals.

Fertilizer should never be applied after mid-July, because that is when trees begin hardening off for winter. That is to say, that is when they stop actively growing. Stimulating growth after that point can lead to winter injury. The new growth that develops doesn’t have time to go through the complex processes that allow it to endure extreme cold. In the spring time, trees that were fertilized too late in the year often have several inches of dead wood at the ends of their branches. They may also sustain more severe frost cracks and sunscald injuries.

Fall fertilization is possible, but it is crucial to wait until leaves drop if you are going to do it and a slow-release product must be used. The only advantage to fall feeding is that nutrients are immediately available in the spring. I tend to believe that the fertilizers might degrade over the winter. I also have concerns about what could occur if temperatures warmed to unseasonable levels after the fertilizer was applied. Since I have always fertilized in the spring time, I have not had the opportunity to test my theories regarding the potential pitfalls of fall fertilization.

Late lawn fertilizer applications can also be a problem. Tree roots growing into lawn areas will inadvertently take up nutrients that were intended for the lawn. The third or fourth lawn fertilizer application turf-loving home owners often make occurs in the fall. For that reason, it is important to avoid spreading late season products beneath the drip lines of trees. This seems to cause more harm to newly planted trees that are in the process of rooting in and becoming established. Larger ball and burlap trees can take a few years to accomplish that task. Mature trees are generally not harmed.