

Bluestem Breezes
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February 24, 2014

Fertilizing Spring-flowering Bulbs

This weekend, I noticed that several of my bulbs are peaking through the soil surface. And, I noticed Sunday morning that I am not the only gardener excited about this as well! You just never know what conversation will end up in this column.

So, for all of you who are chomping at the bit to begin the 2014 gardening season, K-State Specialist Ward Upham gives us information this week on fertilizing those spring-flowering bulbs. Please, read on:

“The best time to fertilize spring-flowering bulbs is when foliage emerges in the spring, rather than at flowering. Traditionally, gardeners have applied fertilizer during bloom or a bit after, but because bulb roots start to die at flowering, fertilizer applied at bloom is wasted.

Roots are active when the foliage first pokes through the ground.

Nutrients applied then help the plant produce flowers the following year. If bulbs have been fertilized in the past, there is often plenty of phosphorus and potassium in the soil. It is best to use a soil test to be certain. If the soil needs phosphorus and potassium, use a complete fertilizer (such as 10-10-10, 9-9-6, etc.) at the rate of 2.5 lbs. per 100 square feet. This would equal 1 rounded teaspoon per square foot. If phosphorus and potassium are not needed, blood meal makes an excellent fertilizer. It should be applied at the rate of 2 lbs. per 100 square feet or 1 teaspoon per square foot. Lawn fertilizers such as a 27-3-3 or 30-3-3 can be used, but cut the rate by a third. Also, make sure the lawn fertilizer does not contain a weed preventer or weed killer.

Remember to leave the foliage until it dies naturally. The energy in the foliage is transferred to the bulb as the foliage dies and will help bloom next year.”

As a reminder, fertilizer is identified as the amount of the macronutrients nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P), and potassium (K) comprised in the mix on a percent weight basis. For example, 27-3-3 indicates the fertilizer contains 27% actual N, 3% P (the oxide form, P₂O₅), and 3% K (the oxide form, K₂O).

Additional information on fertilizing and spring-flowering bulbs is available by visiting the Extension Office (215 Kansas, Courthouse, Alma; kamayer@ksu.edu; 765-3821). For Bluestem Breezes archives, check out wabaunsee.ksu.edu.