

Keep track of your garden fertilizers

By JAMES E. WALTERS
SPECIAL WRITER

PHOENIX (AP) — Many gardeners believe that fertilizers feed plants. If applied correctly, they certainly help plants grow

and produce better. But in the wrong proportions or at the wrong time, they also can kill or be detrimental.

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Tips and facts on hydroponic plants

Hydroponics is a system of growing plants in porous clay pebbles, fertilizer and water, instead of soil. House plants grown in this manner should only be placed indoors and out of direct sunlight.

Hydroponic plant cultivation dates back to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and most of the world's rice crops have always been grown this way in Germany. 50 percent of the house plants are rooted in hydroponics.

There are six components to a hydroponic system:

- Exterior water pot
- Water gauge
- Clay pebbles
- Fertilizer
- Plants

Hydroponic plants are perfect for travelers, according to Brian Hughes, a gardening expert with The Home Depot. By filling the water gauge to the maximum level, the water supply will last up to four weeks, eliminating the guesswork of watering too much or too little.

Many commercial growers use

hydroponic systems for vegetable and herb growing, and commercial interior professionals have found hydroponics to be an efficient and time-saving way of maintaining plants. Hydroponics is an attractive option since the time between watering is lengthened and replacement plants are rarely needed because soil-borne diseases should not afflict the plants.

Fertilizing is an essential part of the hydroponic system. Most hydroponics-raised plants require fertilizer every three to four months, with normal

watering every two to four weeks.

Benefits of hydroponics

- Elimination of soil-borne pests, diseases and weeds.
- The reduction of toxic chemicals and pesticide control.
- Less root growth and increased top growth.
- Different species of plants may be grown together in one container.
- A refreshed growing system touched only by water and fertilizer.

Thinning is not losing weight in your garden

Plant lovers have something in com-

mon with computer lovers; each group has its specialized jargon, not readily understandable to those outside the field. Just as "bytes" and "booting a disc" have nothing to do about using your mouth or kicking a record in the world of computing, "thinning" has nothing to do with losing weight in the world of gardening.

So, an explanation of gardening terms is in order.

"Thinning" is the removal of excess plants. When you sprinkle carrot seeds along a furrow in the

garden, or press three cucumber seeds into the soil in one pot, you are taking out insurance. You really want only one carrot every inch and one cucumber plant in each pot. So once your insurance policy is paid off and many more seedlings come up than should mature, you have to start thinning. Ideally, thin late in the day and just before a rainfall or watering, so that the remaining plants have time to recover from any root damage that occurred as their neighbors were wrenched from the soil.

When you are directed to plant cucumbers in "hills," no mounding of soil is implied. A hill is a grouping of plants, a cluster. Certain vegetables, such as cucumbers and squash, are easier to manage if planted in hills from which the trailing vines can radiate.

A "stand" of plants is a group of plants, which might be a row or a hill. If all your seeds sprouted, and the seedlings look sturdy, brag about your "good stand."

At this time of year, most plants have been removed from their "flats" and planted out in the garden. A flat is a shallow box, with holes for drainage, in which seedlings are started before they are planted outdoors. In contrast to "hill," "flat"

seems like a reasonable term, since a flat is flatter than it is tall.

"Pinching" means just that, almost. The dictionary says that to pinch is "to squeeze between the finger and thumb," but in the garden, the word is used to mean the removal of the tips of plant shoots, so "pinching" might be a more accurate term. Fingernails make a handy here. Pinching makes plants bushier.

Seedlings raised in flats in sunny windows and greenhouses are too accustomed to face the world outdoors without being "hardened off." Hardened-off seedlings by gradually exposing them to increasing sun, wind, cool temperatures and even a little drying. After a week or two of treatment, the once-tender seedlings are tough enough for a permanent home out in the garden, exposed to the whims of nature.

"To cultivate" has two meanings. Cultivate means to care for plants. However, when the directions on a seed packet tell you to cultivate weekly, you are being in and rough up the top inch or so of soil. English gardening books use the phrase "stir the soil." The purpose is to uproot small weeds and loosen the surface so rain seeps in more readily.

By now, seedlings in "flats" were "hardened off" and planted in the garden, in "hills," perhaps. An delicate seedlings from seeds sown directly in the garden prove themselves sturdy, "thin" the "stand" to correct spacing. Good times to "stir the soil" are mornings and following rains.

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