

Fertilization Tips for Keeping Palms Green & Healthy

Michael S. Orfanedes, Urban Forester – Planning & Zoning Division, Development Services Department

Palm fertilizer products are most efficiently used when applied where the roots are, meaning fertilizer needs to be broadcast at least out to the dripline, preferably beyond. This allows the nutrients to come in contact with the entire upper root zone rather than being applied in a single concentrated band near the trunk. Banding fertilizer is regarded as a poor practice because it can damage roots where concentrations are too high and fails to provide adequate fertility for the remainder of the root zone outside of the band.

The other problem with banding tree fertilizer around the trunk is that the remaining untreated areas of the root zone generally receive turf fertilizer. Dr. Timothy Broschat's research at the University of Florida Research & Education Center in Davie clearly shows that palms suffer when repeatedly exposed to turf fertilizers which typically feature high nitrogen to potassium ratios. The problem occurs when nitrogen stimulates vegetative growth beyond the plant's ability to source potassium, leading to potassium deficiency. This research has resulted in the current UF recommendation that no turf fertilizer should come within 30 feet of a palm. Such products are best applied using a hand-held, rotary broadcast applicator.

Below is a recommended basic palm fertilization specification as per current University of Florida guidelines:

- Use a recommended rate of an improved palm special fertilizer containing at least as much potassium (K) as nitrogen (N) and all of which is in a 100% slow release form (e.g. 8-2-10 or 8-4-12), plus micronutrients--e.g. approx. 4% magnesium (Mg) derived from kieserite, 2% manganese (Mn), 2 % iron (Fe), and trace amounts of zinc (Zn), copper (Cu) and boron (B).
- Broadcast a recommended rate of the above-mentioned fertilizer over the entire area under the palm canopy out at least to the dripline, preferably beyond.
- Make 4 applications per year

Most 100 % slow release palm fertilizer products are also suitable for use on shade trees, flowering trees, shrubs and ground covers. Although more expensive than turf fertilizer, they may also be used on turf. Additional information on this subject can be found in "*Best Management Practices for Protection of Water Resources in Florida*" a handbook prepared by the Florida Green Industries Working Group and also in *Ornamental Palm Horticulture*, a book by Dr. Tim Broschat, professor of horticulture at the University of Florida's Ft. Lauderdale Research & Education Center here in Davie.





