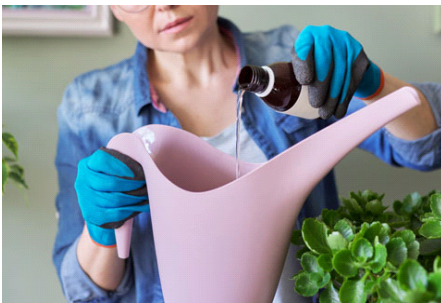


Features

5/1/2022

Feeding Their Appetite

Mason Day



At this point, to call the surge in indoor plant sales a trend feels a bit like an understatement. Houseplants continue to dominate the plant conversation on social media, and now plants like *Monstera deliciosa* and *Ficus lyrata* are playing just as much a role in pop culture as they do in horticulture. However, as indoor plants attract new customers to garden centers and plant shops, a looming question lingers in the back of our minds as the registers ring: “Do these newcomers know how to care for these plants?”

One of the most overlooked aspects of consumer plant care is fertilization. We’ve gotten through to the population that indoor plants need to be watered—even if they’re still figuring out the proper intervals. Yet, the concept of feeding plants is still foreign to a lot of new plant parents and it’s on us to explain that sustained success can’t come from water alone.

Why We Feed

In educating newer consumers on the details of proper plant nutrition one of the biggest barriers that exist is the lack of understanding as to why plants need fertilizer. There can be a misconception that plants get all the nutrients they need from water, sunlight and soil. This can be true to some extent if plants are growing in a natural ecosystem where nutrients are restored to the soil. Trees in the forest do OK without fertilizer, but for a philodendron it’s a bit different. The “soil” used in pots for indoor plants isn’t actually soil at all. We all know it’s media, but to a consumer that might be a conversation for another day. The easiest way in explaining why plants need fertilizer is that everything that a plant churns out has to be replaced.

Leaves are made of more than water and sunshine, and when plants grow a new leaf and drop an older one, they must replenish nutrients. In order to grow more new leaves, we’ve got to replace the nutrients that were lost in the cycle.

It also helps to explain how that plant came to look the way it does. The growers (and you) that cared for this plant likely fed this plant with almost every watering ensuring that it would grow quickly into the specimen before them. If they want to keep it that way, then it’s imperative they keep feeding the plant in the fashion that it’s grown accustomed to.

When all else fails, it’s best to make it relatable. “Would your dog like you if you just gave him water every day?”

Determining What to Feed

After breaking down the plant nutrition barrier, the next immediate question is: “Well, what do I feed it?”

Though the answer to this question is easy for the customer to digest when it comes from you or your staff, it's one that isn't easy for the consumer to get to on their own. The fertilizer aisle/shelf in your store likely contains many options. Which one is best?

This is where we have another great opportunity for consumer education. It's as simple as this: Human diets consist of three major things: Carbohydrates, Proteins and Fats—the macros. Plant “diets” have three macros as well: Nitrogen, Phosphorous and Potassium. Finding the right fertilizer all depends on the “diet” that's best for your plants. If they're looking for peak performance they're going to want to use a fertilizer specifically tailored to their needs.

For example, if they're into African violets and really want them to look nice, they should likely be using a fertilizer blended specifically for African violets (or the macros that African violets like). Just in the same way that humans who want to function at “peak performance” in a given category eat different diets.

Most folks, however, just want to have a green living space with all sorts of plants that “look good.” That's when you explain general/all-purpose fertilizers and category fertilizers to them. These fertilizers offer your plant a “diet” of macros (N,P,K) that covers the needs for a lot of plants to stay healthy and look great, even if not operating at the absolute optimal levels for each specific plant. There are plenty examples of “houseplant” fertilizer blends and bottles that will help consumers looking to cover a broader range.

How Much and How Often?

Your job in answering this is pretty simple—often as easy as helping the consumer decipher a label. In this way, fertilizers are sort of like plant prescriptions; you're the pharmacist there to help inform the consumer on the dosing information. In that way, similar warnings apply as well. If not used as directed, there might be consequences. Too little and you might not see an effect; too much and you might burn your plants. It's also important to inform the customer how to fertilize with a given product. If it's water soluble, they'll need to dissolve or risk burning or runoff; if it's a concentrate, they'll need to dilute properly.

In indoor plants, things are a little different. These plants are living year-round, but still experience the seasons around you in the form of how much light they get. To make sure plants aren't getting hungry, it's best to feed plants more frequently at smaller doses.

As a good reminder to consumers, it might be wise to fertilize at every watering or every other watering with a specific dose. If they calculate it that way, they'll have an easier time remembering to do it. However, in the winter in some locations—because of the decrease in light—it might be best to taper back even further as their plants are likely slowing down their growth rates as well. This will help prevent unwanted buildups and overfeeding.

We know that feeding plants is important for growth, and underneath it all, the customer does as well. We just need to make it relatable enough to digest. They don't need to be a chemist to have great plants and your staff don't need to be professors to get the point across, either. **GP**

Mason Day is the Director of Growth at JR Peters. He actively works with growers and retailers across the industry to help them break down their fertilizer needs and the needs of their customers. He can be reached at mday@jrpeters.com.