

Fertiliser

Cheat Sheet

What NPK actually means, what to feed each part of the garden and when, and a plain-English decoder for 12 common UK fertiliser products.

NPK EXPLAINED · WHAT TO FEED, AND WHEN · PRODUCT DECODER



NPK, in one line

IF YOU REMEMBER NOTHING ELSE

Every fertiliser label shows three numbers, always in the same order: N-P-K, as a percentage by weight. Nitrogen feeds leaves, phosphorus feeds roots, potassium feeds flowers and fruit.

N

NITROGEN

Leaves & stems. Drives lush, leafy, green growth — what lawns and leafy veg need most.

P

PHOSPHORUS

Roots. Builds strong root systems — most useful at planting and sowing time.

K

POTASSIUM

Flowers, fruit & toughness. What tomatoes, roses and fruit trees need most.

HIGH-N, HIGH-P OR HIGH-K?

Pick the feed to match the job: high-nitrogen for leafy growth (lawns, salad crops), high-phosphorus for new roots (planting, bulbs), high-potassium for flowers and fruit (tomatoes, roses).

ORGANIC VS SYNTHETIC

Organic feeds (chicken manure, fish, blood & bone) release slowly and feed the soil life too. Synthetic and liquid feeds act fast but don't last as long.

LITTLE AND OFTEN BEATS A LOT AT ONCE

Overfeeding causes soft, sappy growth that's a magnet for pests and frost damage, and excess nutrients simply wash away. Always follow the label's dilution rate, and only feed while a plant is actively growing — not in autumn or winter.

What to feed, and when

PLANT / AREA	WHAT TO USE	WHEN	WHY
Lawns	High-N spring/summer feed (Apr–Aug); low-N, high-K autumn feed (Sep–Oct)	Spring–summer, then again in autumn	Nitrogen greens up growth in summer; potassium toughens grass for winter
Roses	Granular rose feed (balanced, extra potash)	As growth starts in spring, then again after the first flush	Supports strong, healthy blooms and disease resistance
Tomatoes & fruiting veg	High-potash liquid tomato feed	Weekly, once the first fruits have set — not before	Potassium drives flowering and fruiting rather than leafy growth
Leafy veg & salad crops	General-purpose or high-nitrogen feed	Through the growing season, spring–summer	Nitrogen is what builds lush, leafy growth
Flowering shrubs & perennials	Balanced general feed (e.g. Growmore, fish, blood & bone)	Once in spring, as new growth starts	A general boost for healthy growth and flowering
Acid-loving plants	Ericaceous feed	Spring, then again after flowering	Formulated for low soil pH — an ordinary feed can cause yellowing
Fruit trees & bushes	Balanced general feed, or sulphate of potash	Late winter to early spring	Potash specifically boosts flowering and fruit set
Containers & hanging baskets	Liquid general feed	Every 1–2 weeks through summer	Pot compost's nutrients are used up and washed out fast
Houseplants	Diluted balanced liquid feed	Monthly, April–September only	Most houseplants are dormant or resting over winter
New plantings, bulbs & bare-root trees	Bonemeal or fish, blood & bone, worked into the hole	At planting time	Phosphorus-rich — supports strong root establishment
Bulbs still in the ground	High-potash liquid feed	While leaves are green, after flowering	Builds up the bulb so it flowers well again next year

General guidance for an average UK garden. Always check the product label for exact dilution and application rates — they vary by brand.

Common UK fertiliser products, decoded

PRODUCT	NUTRIENT FOCUS	BEST FOR	NOTE
Growmore	Balanced, approx. 7-7-7	All-round spring/summer feed for beds, veg and lawns	A reliable “if in doubt” all-rounder
Fish, blood & bone	Balanced, organic, slow-release	New plantings, roses, vegetable beds, borders	Improves the soil as it breaks down; smells strong at first
Chicken manure pellets	High nitrogen, organic	Leafy veg, lawns, a general spring feed	Strong smell when watered in — wear gloves
Tomato feed (e.g. Tomorite)	High potash (K)	Tomatoes, peppers, courgettes — anything grown for its fruit	Weekly once the first truss of fruit has set
Seaweed feed / tonic	Low NPK, rich in trace elements	Boosting root growth and easing transplant or drought stress	A tonic and booster, not a complete feed on its own
Bonemeal	High phosphorus, little N or K	Bulbs, trees and shrubs at planting time	Can attract foxes and dogs — avoid where pets dig
Sulphate of potash	Pure potassium only	Boosting flowering/fruiting, or correcting a potash shortfall	A “straight” nutrient, not a complete feed
Sulphate of ammonia	Pure, fast-acting nitrogen	A quick green-up for lawns and leafy crops	Fast but short-lived — easy to overdo
Ericaceous feed	Balanced, formulated for acid soil	Rhododendrons, camellias, azaleas, blueberries, heathers	Also helps keep the soil pH low
Rose feed	Balanced, with extra potash	Roses, and most other flowering shrubs	Apply as growth starts, then again after the first flush
Multi-purpose liquid feed	Balanced, fast-acting	Houseplants, containers, general top-ups	Diluted in water — fast-acting, but doesn't last long
Epsom salts (magnesium sulphate)	Magnesium only — not N, P or K	Yellowing between leaf veins on tomatoes and roses	Treats a specific deficiency; it isn't a general feed

NPK figures are typical approximations — exact numbers vary by brand, so check the label. “N-P-K” numbers are always listed in that order, as a percentage by weight.

Keep a feeding record that actually works

Log what you fed, when, and how each plant responded in your free Gardens & Gardening journal — so you stop guessing and start repeating what works.



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