

Taking care of plant basics play a big part in a beautiful garden

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Just like humans, your plants and flowers have basic needs to grow and flourish: food, water and air. In recent years, container gardens (hanging baskets, flower boxes, etc.) have become very popular, compared to flower and plant beds. How you care for your plants does change depending on where they are growing.

So, let's take a look at the basics of food, water and air for your plants, and how you can make sure you will have the best garden this season you've ever had.

Food

While your plants need a variety of nutrients, nitrogen is the most common. No matter which brand of plant food you buy, the nitrogen quality will be the same. The main consideration is how you apply it.

There are three basic ways to feed your plants:

- Water soluble: dissolves the nutrients in water, and requires you to spray it on plants. Immediately releases nutrients.
- Controlled release: nutrients are released gradually by a chemical reaction, typically started by water (rain or watering your plants).
- Natural organics: nutrients are digested by soil microbes which gradually release nutrients.

For today's typical busy lifestyle, we recommend going with natural organic plant food. Water soluble needs weekly applications. While we've used controlled release, we've found that it does not release enough nutrients. Natural organics provide a steady, consistent release of proper nutrients, and usually requires only monthly applications.

For flower beds, if you typically use the same location year after year, it's best to apply and mix in fertilizer into the soil before you do your planting. Be sure to mix in the fertilizer, rather than just sprinkling it on top. Once that's done, go right ahead and start your planting.

Water

The most common problem for plants is lack of water. Many plants need to be watered every day. This is especially true of container gardens. Water in baskets and other containers tends to evaporate quicker than bedded gardens. Usually, about half of the water you give it evaporates in the basket.

If you have large baskets, such as 12-14 inches, then you can sometimes get by with less frequent watering. That's because the larger soil volume slows evaporation.

For bedding plants, you determine if watering is needed by how moist the soil is four inches deep. Simply stick a finger or two down into the dirt. If it feels moist, you don't need to water. Come back and check tomorrow.

Air

For bedding plants, air – that is space between plants – is not generally an issue. Simply follow directions on the plants tag or the seed packet.

For baskets, a good guideline is to take the basket size and divide that number by two. That will give you the maximum number of plants you should have. For example, in a 12-inch basket, six plants would be the maximum you would want to plant.

Remember, your locally-owned Maumee Valley Grower is here to help you. They best know the Northwest Ohio climate, soil and plants, and can offer additional guidance and advice to help make your garden grow.

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Jeff and Eileen Creque have operated Creque's Greenhouse, 9700 Sylvania Ave., Sylvania, for 20 years. For questions or more information about Creque's, call 419-829-2941.

The Maumee Valley Growers is an association consisting of 80 Northwest Ohio greenhouses. Members share best practices and other resources to improve their operations while also improving their products and services to assist gardeners. See www.maumeevalleygrowers.com.