

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

Here is the poop on poop

BY SIOUX ROGERS



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What is plant “fertilizer”? Sure, most of you know the word—“fertilizer” or “manure” or “....” All I am thinking and talking about is free fertilizer. A pile of poop, given as a gift. How lucky can a gal get?

Because we live in the country, we have a smorgasbord of “country poop.” Included in the “menu” is manure from chickens, cows, horses, sheep, goats, pigs, and llamas. That about covers the variety of country poop.

Basically, the usefulness of any fertilizer for either the home garden or a giant industrial plot comes down to just three ingredients: nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P), and potassium (K).

Those letters, NPK, appear on the front of most fertilizer products, each letter followed by a number. Sometimes just the numbers appear, without the letters.

For example, a label that looks like “The Right Stuff” pictured on this page or the XYZ Brand label is telling you the percentage of nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium (potash) contained in each bag.

Now that that is perfectly clear, a quick lesson on the necessity of each ingredient.

Nitrogen (N) is important for green leafy growth. You know—the leafy green stuff you love to hate, such as spinach, lettuce, kale, and collards. Keeping grass green is also very dependent on nitrogen. Low nitrogen makes plants pale green, sometimes even yellow (see photo.) Too much nitrogen on flowers or fruit trees will produce bushy green plants and trees but few flowers and fruit. Dang.

Phosphorous (P) is an important nutrient for the development of

flowers and fruit. It is also a significant ingredient for root health and growth.

Potassium (K) is also important for robust development of flowers, fruit, and roots. Potassium helps the roots absorb water and avoid the effects of drought. Potassium is essential to the metabolic processes of virtually all plants. It promotes strong stems, well-formed flowers, robust fruits, and healthy roots.

It's not guesswork to determine the NPK of barnyard manure you buy as it has been formally analyzed. However, the NPK numbers may vary when you are scooping piles out of your or your neighbor's barnyard, depending on what the animals have been eating.



Example of a plant fertilizer label.



A young cabbage plant exhibiting nitrogen deficiency.

“Hot” manure can burn your plants, but a “cold” manure can be used without composting. C o m p o s t manure for at least three or four months to turn it from hot to cold.

The list below is what you have been waiting for. (For even more information, visit Alpacas of Montana at bityl.co/CDMb.)

Alpaca manure (1.7-.69-1.2): Alpaca compost has the highest NPK of any natural fertilizer. It is lower in organic matter

than the manure from most other barnyard livestock (cows, horses, goats, and sheep) so is less hot. The nitrogen and potassium content is comparatively high.

Poultry manures (1.1-1.4-0.6): These are often simply chicken droppings

mixed with the droppings of other domesticated birds, including ducks, pigeons, and turkeys. Poultry manure can easily burn plants unless it is composted first.

Cattle manure (0.6-0.2-0.5): Steer manure is one of the old standbys, but it often contains unwanted salts and weed seeds. It's usually a cold manure.

Goat manure (0.7-0.3-0.9): It can be treated in a similar fashion to sheep dung or horse manure. It is usually fairly dry and rich and is a “hot” manure (best composted before use).

Horse manure (0.7-0.3-0.6): It's about half as rich as chicken manure, but richer in nitrogen than cow manure. And, like chicken droppings, it's considered “hot.”

Sheep manure (0.7-0.3-0.9): It is another “hot” manure. It is somewhat dry and very rich. Manure from sheep fed hay and grain will be more potent than manure from animals that live on pasture.

Pig manure (0.5-0.3-0.5): This is a highly concentrated or “hot” manure. It is less rich in nitrogen than horse or bird crap, but stronger than many of the other animal manures.

Rabbit manure (2.4-1.4-0.6): It is the “hottest” of the animal manures. It may even be higher in nitrogen than some poultry manures.

In the end, the best manure for your garden is what you can easily get your hands on. After all, if you can't find rabbit manure, it doesn't matter how good for your soil it might be!

Dirty fingernails and all,
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