

## ***Organic Fertilizer Use Leads to Different Growth Response, Nutrient Use, and Nitrogen Leaching by Marigold ‘First Lady’***

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**S**ome organic fertilizers are suitable for greenhouse crops and can also fit the current ways of applying fertilizers commercially. However, not much information is available on plant response, nutrient supplying power, or the environmental impact of nutrient leaching with organic fertilizers. Not surprisingly, because of their differences in the makeup, levels of success in growing acceptable greenhouse crops with organic fertilizers can be quite variable (Cox, 2010).

The organic fertilizers in this study were fish fertilizer, Daniels Pinnacle, and alfalfa pellets. Most growers are somewhat familiar with fish fertilizer and its characteristics. Daniels Pinnacle is a less well known water-soluble fertilizer; it's unique because its nutrients are derived from oilseed extract and sodium nitrate (“Chilean nitrate”). Biernbaum (2006) tried alfalfa meal as a fertilizer on bedding plants with some success. In this study I used alfalfa pellets (similar in appearance to wood pellets) commonly used for animal feed or outdoor soil improvement.

In working with organic fertilizers I have wondered whether fertilizer combinations might work better than one type alone. So I included several combination treatments in this study to try to take advantage of the best chemical and physical characteristics of each fertilizer. For example, perhaps the combination of soluble fish fertilizer and slow nutrient release alfalfa pellets might be a better choice than either alone.

The objective of this project, supported by a grant from New England Floriculture, Inc., was to learn more about the effects of organic fertilizers on the growth, nutrient uptake, and nitrogen leaching by a typical potted greenhouse crop.

### **How the plants were grown**

Plug seedlings of ‘First Lady’ marigold were potted on 15 January 2010 in 4-inch pots of Fafard Organic Formula (FOF #30) soilless mix. Pots were suspended through the lids of larger containers to collect the leachate for ammonium ( $\text{NH}_4\text{-N}$ ) and nitrate ( $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ ) analysis at 10 day intervals as the plants grew.

Plants were fertilized with water-soluble Plantex (20-2-20) chemical fertilizer, Daniels Pinnacle (3-1-1), Neptune’s Fish Fertilizer (2-4-1), or alfalfa pellets (5-1-2). Also, some fertilizers were applied in combination: Daniels + fish (alternating), Fish (at every 4<sup>th</sup> watering) + alfalfa pellets, or Daniels (at every 4<sup>th</sup> watering) + alfalfa pellets. The water-soluble fertilizers were applied at 175 ppm N during the first 30 days after transplanting and then 225 ppm N to finish. The alfalfa pellets were incorporated with the mix prior to planting at a rate of 30 gm (~1.0 oz.)/pot.

On 18 March, 62 days after transplanting, plant height, plant diameter, and terminal flower bud diameter were measured and the plants were harvested for shoot dry weight determination and recently-matured leaves were sampled for nutrient analysis.

## Results

**Plant appearance and growth.** Plants fertilized with Plantex and Neptune's Fish were normal in appearance with dark green foliage associated with this type of marigold (Figure 1). Daniels Pinnacle and alfalfa pellets resulted in chlorotic foliage suggestive of N deficiency and a marked reduction in plant size in the case of Daniels Pinnacle. Plants grown with fertilizer combinations (Daniels + Neptune's Fish, alfalfa pellets + Neptune's Fish, or Daniels + alfalfa pellets, not pictured) were similar to those receiving Plantex or Neptune's Fish.



**Figure 1** (Left to right). 'First Lady' marigold fertilized with Plantex 20-2-20, Neptune's Fish Fertilizer 2-4-1, Daniels Pinnacle 3-1-1, and alfalfa pellets 5-1-2.

Height of plants in all treatments, except Neptune's Fish, was about the same (Table 1). Plants getting fish fertilizer were slightly, but significantly, shorter. Plantex, Neptune's Fish, alfalfa pellets, and all combination treatments produced plants with similar plant and flower bud diameter. Plantex produced the greatest shoot dry weight. The smallest flower buds, smallest plant diameter, and the least dry weight resulted from the use Daniels Pinnacle.

**Table 1.** Growth of 'First Lady' marigold with chemical fertilizer or different types and combinations of organic fertilizers.

Fertilizer	Plant hgt. (cm)	Plant dia. (cm)	Bud dia. (cm)	Shoot dry wt. (gm)
Plantex 20-2-20	30.1a	37.5ab	7.1a	19.9a
Daniels 3-1-1	30.6a	29.3c	4.7b	8.5d
Alfalfa pellets 5-1-2	30.7a	35.1b	6.6a	14.7c
Fish 2-4-1	28.3b	36.7ab	7.5a	16.0bc
Fish + Daniels	30.9a	34.5b	7.3a	16.4bc
Pellets + Daniels	31.0a	35.4a	6.8a	15.0c
Pellets + Fish	31.1a	37.7a	7.6a	17.5b

**Nitrogen leaching.** Fertilizer material had a great effect on N leaching (Table 2). The largest amount of N leached with Neptune's Fish, mostly in the form of  $\text{NH}_4\text{-N}$  rather than  $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ . Lesser amounts of N leached with Plantex and Daniels Pinnacle, mostly as  $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ , and the Neptune's Fish + Daniels

combination as  $\text{NH}_4\text{-N}$ . The least amount of N leached with alfalfa pellets alone or in combination with Daniels Pinnacle or Neptune's Fish.

**Table 2.** Nitrogen leaching by 'First Lady' marigold treated with chemical fertilizer or different types and combinations of organic fertilizers.

Fertilizer	$\text{NH}_4\text{-N}$ (mg/pot)	$\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ (mg/pot)	Total N (mg/pot)	Total leachate vol.(ml)
Plantex 20-2-20	20.7de	51.5a	72.2b	511d
Daniels 3-1-1	15.0e	45.2b	60.2bc	2215a
Alfalfa pellets 5-1-2	13.8e	13.5cd	27.3d	1178bc
Fish 2-4-1	184.8a	7.1d	191.9a	1298b
Fish + Daniels	67.3b	12.3cd	79.6b	886c
Pellets + Daniels	17.8e	21.5c	38.3cd	1168bc
Pellets + Fish	33.6cd	7.3d	40.9cd	726cd

**Nutritional factors.** Fertilizer type led to some dramatic differences in nutritional factors which could affect the growth of marigold and other greenhouse plants (Table 3). Fertilizing with Plantex and Neptune's Fish resulted the highest growth medium EC (soluble salts level) while the other treatments resulted in low to moderate EC and one, Daniels Pinnacle, had an EC near deficiency. Growth medium pH ranged between 5.0 and 5.9 in all treatments except Daniels Pinnacle alone and in combination with alfalfa pellets where pH was unusually high at 7.4 and 6.9, respectively.

**Table 3.** Some nutritional factors associated with 'First Lady' marigold treated with chemical fertilizer or different types and combinations of organic fertilizers.

Fertilizer	EC (mmho/cm)	pH	N (%)	Ca (%)	Fe (ppm)
Plantex 20-2-20	1.48a	5.1d	5.70a	1.90d	233a
Daniels 3-1-1	0.69d	7.4a	3.17d	1.67e	78c
Alfalfa pellets 5-1-2	0.90cd	5.9c	2.37e	2.24c	65c
Fish 2-4-1	1.30ab	5.0d	5.44a	3.64a	101bc
Fish + Daniels	1.10bc	5.9c	4.49b	2.71b	108b
Pellets + Daniels	0.88cd	6.9b	2.46e	2.13c	61c
Pellets + Fish	0.88cd	5.7c	3.70c	2.57b	90bc

Many significant differences in the accumulation of nutrients in the plant leaves occurred between fertilizer treatments and some are shown in Table 3. Leaves of Plantex and Neptune's Fish plants contained much more N than the other treatments while Daniels Pinnacle, alfalfa pellets, and their combination were the lowest in N and close to N deficiency. Plants getting Neptune's Fish contained significantly more Ca and more P, Mg, Zn, Mn (not shown) than the other treatments. Iron (Fe) was highest in Plantex-fertilized plants and lowest in plants fertilized with Daniels, alfalfa pellets, or the combination.

## Conclusion: What does it all mean?

Use of Plantex chemical fertilizer or Neptune's Fish Fertilizer resulted in the best growth of 'First Lady' marigold. Nutrient levels in the leaves of plants receiving these fertilizers were normal and well above deficiency levels for marigold. However, P, Ca, Mg, Mn, and Zn levels were significantly higher with Neptune's Fish than Plantex and all other fertilizers and Fe was highest of all fertilizers in the leaves of Plantex-fertilized plants. Another major difference between Plantex and Neptune's Fish was the level of N leaching. A great deal more N leached with Neptune's Fish and mostly in the form of  $\text{NH}_4\text{-N}$ .

These differences between the two fertilizers, even though they were applied at the same rate of N, demonstrate that different types of fertilizers can result in greatly different levels of nutrient accumulation in the plant and in nutrient leaching from the pot.

Plants fertilized with alfalfa pellets or Daniels Pinnacle were chlorotic and Daniels plants produced significantly less shoot dry weight and had slower flower development (as measured by flower bud diameter) than all other fertilizers. What was the cause of the chlorosis and the reduced growth? In the case of alfalfa pellets, low N in the leaves indicates that the plants did not get enough N from the pellets, while the Daniels results might be due to the higher growth medium pH, a possible cause of lower Fe in the leaves, and/or N deficiency. Each of these effects with Daniels was observed with calibrachoa in an earlier study (Cox, 2010) and they were accompanied by extreme chlorosis suggesting Fe deficiency. It would be interesting to see if supplemental Fe or N, or acid acidification of the growth medium, might prevent what appears to be deficiency symptoms and improve the growth of calibrachoa and marigold when Daniels Pinnacle is applied.

I'm convinced that growers trying organic fertilizers might get the best results by using a combination of two different fertilizers as I did in this study. Some organic fertilizers seem to be "unbalanced" in a sense and positive, complementary effects may result from using two different types. For example, fish fertilizer provides lots of N and other elements but it could be too rich in  $\text{NH}_4\text{-N}$  for some plants, while alfalfa pellets provide too little N to carry heavily watered potted plants to finish. However, alfalfa pellets can supply enough nutrition for about the first 4-5 weeks after planting, after this time the fish fertilizer could be used once weekly to finish the plants without N deficiency. In this study, the three combination treatments produced plants similar in size and development to Plantex-fertilized plants without nutrient deficiency and with some enhancement of nutrient levels in the leaves and lower N leaching compared to Daniels or Neptune's Fish alone.

## References

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