

Alfalfa - the Powerful Plant Growth Stimulant Will Make Your Hostas Shine!
Ted White, Minot, Maine.

Natural or organic soil amendments are usually the best choice for stimulating plant growth, as many of these organic substances can improve the microbial activity in your garden soil that, in turn, will promote the release of nutrients already present in the soil. Simply spreading inorganic fertilizers across the garden landscape is a short term fertilizer regimen that, in the long run, does not really benefit your plants. With alfalfa you can grow your hostas to their maximum potential. You will notice a deepening of the leaf colour and shine, particularly in your solid green hostas. But this is only part of the story; wait until you see how quickly your plants develop into lush, strong specimen plants. In some cases first and second year plantings can double in size and root development.

Alfalfa contains a wealth of nutrients that will be highly beneficial to the growth of your plants. Perhaps its most valuable component is its powerful growth Stimulant, Triacontanol. In fact, alfalfa has been used as plant stimulant for more than 50 years, and Triacontanol has been called the most potent growth hormone ever used in the production of flowers and agricultural crops such as corn. This naturally occurring stimulant will significantly boost the growth of your plants, perhaps more so than any other single ingredient that may be added to your garden soil.

In addition to Triacontanol, alfalfa contains a wealth of minerals needed by your hostas, daylilies, irises, hostas, roses, and peonies. Chemical analyses of dry alfalfa indicate the presence of 3.75 –5.5% nitrogen, 0.75 – 3.5% potassium, 0.3 – 0.7% phosphorus, 1 - 2% calcium, 0.30 – 1% magnesium, 0.2 – 0.5% sulfur. Alfalfa also contains these micronutrients: manganese, iron, boron, copper, and zinc. It also contains a high concentration of Vitamin A, and a great number of amino acids, too many to mention here.

Alfalfa comes in three forms that can usually be purchased at agricultural feed stores, i.e., Paris Farmer's Union and Agway. You may purchase it in pellet, cube, or meal form. For more rapid chemical breakdown in garden soil, alfalfa meal is likely best. However, one must be very careful when applying dry alfalfa meal in the garden. It is very light and dusty, and although its dust is nontoxic, it can create respiratory problems if inhaled; therefore, we recommend that you use a mask to cover your nose and mouth, even if the air seems calm. Alfalfa pellets are about the size of the pellets that might be fed to animals such as rabbits, horses, etc., and is virtually dust free. They can be applied to the soil without any fear of alfalfa dust getting into your lungs. They also break down fairly quickly, especially if applied before a rain storm. We further recommend that the alfalfa be mixed with the soil. This will promote more rapid microbial activity and will make alfalfa's nutrients and growth stimulant more readily available to your plants. Alfalfa cubes would not be our choice for garden use. The cubes are larger than the pellets, making them more difficult to spread across the garden surface evenly.

Alfalfa tea is a special brew that you can make and apply directly to your garden soil. In fact, alfalfa tea is the quickest and best method of supplying the Triacontanol and nutrients to

your plants. Orchid and rose growers have used alfalfa tea as a foliar spray. Some iris growers have even mulched their beds with alfalfa meal. Delphinium and hosta growers have found that the Epsom salts included in this brew help to ward off slugs. Making alfalfa tea will definitely be worth your time and effort, and there are various methods and ingredients that can be used to make tea in either small pails or bulk containers. Here is one step by step method of making your own alfalfa tea:

Obtain a 32-gallon plastic or leak proof trash barrel with a tight fitting lid or a large container of about that size. Position it in a convenient location, as you do not want to try to move it once full. Add 24 cups of alfalfa pellets or meal, or use the formula of 4 cups to 5 gallons of water. Fill the container with water and stir the contents thoroughly about three times a day for the next three days to completely dissolve the pellets. Put on a tight lid to prevent mosquitoes from breeding in your "swamp." On the third day add up to 2 cups of Epsom salts (magnesium sulfate crystals) and 3 tablespoons of iron chelate and 1 cup of fish emulsion. Stir the brew thoroughly and you are ready to apply the alfalfa tea. If you wish, you can let the mixture stand for up to one week until it bubbles with fermentation. Your nose will probably tell you when it's ready. Just add the iron chelate, fish emulsion, and Epsom salts just prior to application.

Using alfalfa tea

Apply the tea once per month in the spring and summer, especially after the first flush of flowers, to encourage repeat blooming. You can also reduce or eliminate the Epsom salts in later batches. Stop applying the tea in the fall, when you want plants to begin hardening off for the winter. The last thing you want to do at this time is to encourage new growth. Before applying the tea put on some old clothes, as you may likely splash a little of the brew onto your clothing, and you certainly do not want to be socializing with friends while wearing alfalfa tea. Take a small or convenient size pail and scoop into the tea barrel after stirring one last time and apply to your plants.

You can apply up to a gallon around a large clump of hostas, irises, daylilies, roses, peonies, and other perennials. For smaller clumps reduce the amount by about one-half. The only drawback to alfalfa tea is the "barnyard odour," but it's a very minor problem, when you consider that your efforts will result in superior plant growth, greater bloom production, and more luxuriant leaves. Alfalfa tea, pellets, or meal can have the following beneficial effects in your garden: The plants may break dormancy earlier, the plants may double in weight in one year, they may show the equivalent of three years growth in one growing season, they may have a greatly expanded root system, there may be a doubling of the number and size of flower buds, flowers and seeds (especially in daylilies), or there will be a much improved quality of growth with increased number and thickness of the leaves.

Sources for the ingredients used to make alfalfa tea: You can find Epsom salts at your local pharmacy or garden centre. Fish emulsion and iron chelate may be found in garden centres, or online. Alfalfa can be found at most animal feed stores. We recommend that you purchase a 50 lb. bag. It should cost no more than \$10. The other ingredients are also quite inexpensive, especially when purchased in bulk from a garden centre or animal feed store.

A summary on the use of alfalfa tea: Alfalfa tea is a natural and inexpensive fertilizer. It is

a fast-acting source of nitrogen and growth stimulant. If you do not have time to make the tea, you can scatter the pellets or spread the meal directly on the garden beds; however, dry alfalfa is a good slow-releasing source of nitrogen. The tea goes to work the moment you apply it, and you don't have to worry about weed seeds sprouting from the fertilizer. Once you have used alfalfa tea you will never use commercial fertilizers again. The benefits of the tea are that dramatic. If your garden is large and you do not think you have the time to cover the entire garden with alfalfa, why not treat one or two beds this season and compare the results with those plants denied this magic brew. Of course those plants that are denied this organic treat may have their own way of telling you that they would have enjoyed this magic potion, too.

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Note to Editor from Dan Cooper, 416 422-4488:

1. This article was written by Ted White, Minot, Maine, and appeared in the Canadian Daylily Journal, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2007/2008, and is reprinted with permission from the author.
2. It is not recommended to use the pellet form in your garden if you have a problem with rabbits.