

How to Fertilize a Bonsai Tree

A beginner guide to choosing a fertilizer and feeding with confidence



Fertilizing a bonsai does not have to begin with memorizing ratios or building a complicated calendar.

Begin by identifying the kind of tree you have and checking whether it is growing. Then choose one primary fertilizer that matches the tree and your goal.

THE ONE RULE

If you remember only one rule, remember this: fertilize a healthy bonsai while it is actively growing.

Fertilizer supports growth. It cannot correct poor light, damaged roots, pests, or a watering problem.

The short answer

Feed during active growth.

New leaves, extending shoots, and normal water use are better signals than a date alone.

Choose one primary fertilizer.

Pellets provide a steady background feed. Liquid fertilizer gives you more control over individual applications.

Follow the product rate.

Bonsai pots vary in size, depth, soil, and watering frequency, so one universal scoop cannot fit every product.

Pause when the tree is stressed.

Wait after shipping, repotting, severe pruning, pest problems, or root trouble until healthy growth returns.

Start with the tree

A beginner usually needs to answer two questions before buying fertilizer.

- 1 Is the tree tropical or cold-hardy?** Tropical bonsai may continue growing indoors when light and warmth are adequate. Cold-hardy bonsai follow an outdoor seasonal cycle and rest during winter.
- 2 What is the goal?** A developing tree may need stronger growth. A refined tree may need gentler maintenance. A flowering tree needs a program that supports health without pushing unnecessary leafy growth.

Flowering is not a third climate category. An azalea may be a cold-hardy flowering bonsai, while a bougainvillea is a tropical flowering bonsai. The tropical or cold-hardy classification tells you when to feed. The flowering goal helps you choose what to feed.

Which fertilizer should I use

Choose one primary fertilizer that matches your tree and your goal

**TROPICAL OR
DEVELOPING**

Bonsai Thrive

Long-lasting growth
fertilizer

+ **MicroTotal** every 6-
8 weeks

**COLD-HARDY OR
REFINED**

BioGold

Gentle organic pellets

+ **MicroTotal** every 6-
8 weeks

FLOWERING

Hanasaku

Bloom-focused pellets

+ **MicroTotal** every 6-
8 weeks

ONE SIMPLE LIQUID

Uncle Bill's 3-3-3

Balanced liquid
routine

**Use during active
growth**

BEGINNER RULE

Use one primary fertilizer and treat MicroTotal as a supplement

A SIMPLE STARTING POINT FOR CHOOSING ONE PRIMARY FERTILIZER

What fertilizer does

A bonsai grows in a small amount of soil and is watered thoroughly and often. Water moving through a container can carry soluble nutrients out with it, so the tree eventually needs those nutrients replaced. Fertilizer supplies raw materials the tree can use while it is already carrying out normal growth.

Fertilizer is not plant medicine. Adding more will not repair roots that cannot absorb water, create light that is not available, or cure insects and disease. When a tree looks weak, confirm light, watering, drainage, temperature, and pests before assuming it needs food.

What the three numbers mean

Every fertilizer displays three numbers in the same order: nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. The numbers are percentages by weight, not a rating of product quality.

Nitrogen supports leaves, stems, chlorophyll, and vegetative growth.

Phosphorus supports energy transfer and is involved in roots, flowers, and fruit.

Potassium

supports water regulation, strength, and many normal plant functions.

All three nutrients matter. A higher middle number does not automatically create more flowers, and a high first number is not always better. The useful ratio depends on the species, season, and whether the goal is development, refinement, or flowering.

The three numbers in plain language

The numbers show the percentage of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium



NITROGEN

Supports leaves, stems, and vegetative growth



PHOSPHORUS

Supports energy transfer, roots, flowers, and fruit



POTASSIUM

Supports water balance, strength, and normal plant functions

A bigger middle number does not guarantee more flowers

Light, species, health, pruning, and season still determine whether a bonsai can bloom

THE MEANING OF N P AND K ON A FERTILIZER LABEL

Choose one primary fertilizer

A primary fertilizer supplies the main feeding program. Beginners usually get better results from one understandable routine than from layering several products without knowing why.

TREE OR GOAL	PRIMARY FERTILIZER	WHY IT FITS
Tropical bonsai or a tree being developed	Bonsai Thrive 180 19-5-9	Long-lasting granular feeding for stronger growth, foliage, and development
Cold-hardy or refined outdoor bonsai	BioGold 3.5-3.7-3.3	Gentle organic pellets for steady seasonal feeding
Flowering bonsai	Hanasaku 1.5-9-4.5	Pellet fertilizer selected for a bloom-focused program
A simple liquid-only routine	Uncle Bill's Liquid Bonsai Brew 3-3-3	A balanced low-dose liquid that is easy to mix and apply

MicroTotal has a different job

MicroTotal is a concentrated 5-0-0 liquid supplement. It supplies nitrogen along with iron, magnesium, sulfur, manganese, copper, zinc, and boron. It does not contain phosphorus or potassium, so it does not replace a complete primary fertilizer.

The beginner approach is simple: choose one primary fertilizer, then use MicroTotal every 6 to 8 weeks during active growth when the program calls for additional micronutrient support. Use 1 tablespoon per gallon for indoor tropical bonsai and 2 tablespoons per gallon for outdoor bonsai. Apply only enough mixed solution to water the pot normally.

How to apply fertilizer safely

- 1 Check the tree.** Look for new leaves, extending shoots, healthy foliage, and normal drying between waterings.
- 2 Check the soil.** If the soil is bone dry, moisten it first. Do not pour concentrated fertilizer onto dry, stressed roots.
- 3 Measure the product.** Use the current package directions for that fertilizer. Do not substitute a rate from a different product.

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- 4 **Apply evenly.** Spread pellets around the pot or divide them among fertilizer baskets. Apply liquid across the soil until water drains normally.
 - 5 **Keep the normal watering routine.** Pellet fertilizer releases as the tree is watered. A gallon is a mixing ratio, not the amount one bonsai must receive.
 - 6 **Record the date.** A calendar reminder prevents forgotten or duplicated applications.
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Simple starting routines

TROPICAL BONSAI WITH ACTIVE GROWTH

Use Bonsai Thrive as the primary fertilizer and MicroTotal every 6 to 8 weeks. Use the tropical guide for basket counts and indoor versus outdoor rates.

COLD-HARDY BONSAI IN SEASON

Use BioGold while the tree is growing and MicroTotal every 6 to 8 weeks. Stop routine feeding as dormancy approaches.

FLOWERING BONSAI

Use Hanasaku as the primary fertilizer, then follow the tropical or cold-hardy calendar for that species. Add MicroTotal on its own schedule.

ONE UNCOMPLICATED LIQUID

Use Uncle Bill's 3-3-3 at the labeled dilution during active growth. Do not automatically add a pellet fertilizer too.

When to wait

- ✗ The tree just arrived and has not settled into its new light and watering routine.
- ✗ The tree was recently repotted, root-pruned, or heavily styled and has not resumed healthy growth.
- ✗ Leaves are wilting, dropping rapidly, scorched, or showing an unresolved pest problem.
- ✗ Water sits on the soil or runs around a dry root ball instead of moving through it normally.
- ✗ A cold-hardy bonsai is dormant, even if it is an evergreen that still has needles or foliage.
- ✗ An indoor tropical has stopped growing because winter light is too weak.

There is no universal number of days to wait after repotting. Recovery depends on the species, season, amount of root work, temperature, and aftercare. Resume feeding when the tree is stable and healthy growth has returned.

Common beginner questions

Can fertilizer save a sick bonsai?

Usually not. Diagnose watering, drainage, light, temperature, roots, and pests first. Fertilizer is useful when a functioning tree is ready to grow.

Should I use pellets and liquid fertilizer together?

It can be done, but a beginner does not need to stack products. Start with one primary fertilizer. Add MicroTotal only on its separate schedule, and add another complete fertilizer only when you have a clear reason.

Do I fertilize every time I water?

No. Water whenever the tree needs water. Apply fertilizer only at the product's stated interval. Most waterings will be plain water.

Do I fertilize in winter?

Do not fertilize dormant cold-hardy bonsai. A tropical bonsai may be fed in winter only if it remains warm, receives strong light, and continues producing healthy growth.

Does yellow foliage always mean a nutrient deficiency?

No. Yellow leaves can result from watering trouble, weak light, normal seasonal change, damaged roots, pests, or nutrient availability. Check the whole growing situation before adding fertilizer.

Do I need 0-10-10?

Most beginners do not need it as part of a core feeding program. It is a specialized nitrogen-free product for a deliberate late-season plan, not a complete everyday fertilizer and not a reason to feed a dormant tree all winter.

Continue with the right guide

How to Fertilize Tropical Bonsai

Use this for ficus, dwarf jade, schefflera, Fukien tea, and other tropical bonsai.

How to Fertilize Cold Hardy Bonsai

Use this for outdoor deciduous trees and conifers that follow a seasonal dormancy cycle.

How to Fertilize Flowering Bonsai

Use this when flowers are the goal, after identifying whether the tree is tropical or cold-hardy.

PRODUCTS MENTIONED IN THIS GUIDE

[Bonsai Thrive 180](#)

[MicroTotal](#)

[BioGold](#)

[Hanasaku](#)

[Uncle Bill's Liquid Bonsai Brew 3-3-3](#)

SHOP ALL BONSAI OUTLET
FERTILIZERS AND FEEDING
BUNDLES