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## Commercial Plum Production

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### *Management Highlights*

- Target pH: 6.5
- Use tissue analysis to supplement soil analysis for evaluating nutrient requirements of orchard crops. For most accurate results, collect leaf samples between July 15 and August 15.
- Watch for micronutrient deficiency during the growing season.

### Introduction

Nutrient management of orchard crops can be divided into three separate programs:

- 1) initial site preparation and establishment of cover crops;
- 2) management of the trees; and
- 3) management of the tree-row middles and the permanent sod or cover crop.

The first program, initial site preparation and cover crop establishment, is very important to the future success of the orchard. It enables the grower to correct problems prior to setting the trees and enhance conditions that will benefit the growth of the trees. For additional information, see the recommendation for *Orchard Sod and - Cover Crops*.

Programs 2 and 3, management of the trees and tree-row middles, are interrelated and refer to the annual nutrient management of the orchard. As with several other perennial crops, orchard management may involve either broadcast applications of nutrients or individual tree fertilization. When broadcast applications are used, the nutrient and lime needs of the row middles, and therefore the permanent sod or cover crop, will be met. When an individual tree fertilization program is being used, it is necessary to follow a separate nutrient management program for the row middles to ensure that the permanent sod or cover crop is

properly limed and fertilized. For additional information, see the recommendation for *Orchard Sod and Cover Crops*.

### Yield Goals

Yield of plums is influenced by many factors beyond soil test results and fertilizer application. Cultivar selection, tree age, weather conditions, soil type and water-holding capacity, weed, insect and disease pressure and crop management practices are just a few. *For that reason, the University of Delaware does not use yield goals in determining nutrient recommendations for orchard crops at the present time. Instead, recommended rates are designed to produce maximum economic yields of high market quality in a good to average year.* Growers should use these nutrient recommendations along with field history data, tissue testing, knowledge of specific crop requirements, management plans and conditions from the current growing season to develop an appropriate fertilizer program for the crop.

### Soil pH and Liming

The target pH for plums on most Delaware soils is 6.5. Soils that are high in organic matter ("black" soils) have a lower target pH (5.6) because organic matter moderates some of the effects of excessive soil acidity (e.g., aluminum toxicity).

The lime recommendation for a specific field is calculated from the soil pH and buffer pH measurements using the steps outlined in *Calculating the Lime Requirement -- Chapter 3, Section 3.4*. Avoid overliming in order to prevent deficiency of micronutrients such as manganese or zinc.

In most cases, the lime requirement can be met by either calcitic or dolomitic limestone.

*Dolomitic limestone* is recommended if:

- soil test Mg is less than 50 FIVs, or
- soil test Mg is between 50 and 100 FIVs *and less than soil test Ca.*

*Calcitic limestone* is recommended if:

- soil test Mg is greater than 100 FIVs, or
- soil test Mg is between 50 and 100 FIVs *and greater than soil test Ca.*

**Nitrogen Management**

Nitrogen (N) recommendations for established plantings of commercial plum trees are dependent upon the N requirement of individual trees as influenced by the age and development of the trees, the tree type, degree of pruning and the soil management program being followed. A summary of N recommendations is given below in Table 1. For best response, N should be applied one month before bloom. To evaluate the effectiveness of the nutrient management program, use tissue testing of leaf samples collected between July 15 and August 15 to determine adjustments for the following year.

**Table 1. Nitrogen recommendations for individual plum trees in commercial production.**

Tree Status	N Rate
<u>Immature Trees</u>	— lbs N / yr of age —
Non-bearing	0.1 - 0.2
Immature, bearing	0.05 - 0.1
<u>Mature Trees</u>	— lbs N / tree —
Standard varieties	0.5 - 1.0
Dwarf varieties	0.25 - 0.50

**Individual Tree Fertilization**

When individual trees are being fertilized, fertilizer should be spread evenly over the drip area beneath the tree according to the rates shown in Table 1, above. For best results, the drip area should be kept free of vegetation to eliminate competition from weeds for nutrients and moisture.

**Broadcast Fertilization**

The N rates above are specified per individual tree. When a broadcast application is planned, N rates need to be recalculated to ensure that the area beneath the trees receive sufficient fertilizer.

To convert the rates shown in Table 1 to lbs N/ac, use the following equation:

$$BC\ Rate = \frac{(RNR \times TPA)}{DA}$$

where:

- BC Rate = broadcast N rate (lbs N/ac)
- RNR = recommended N rate per-tree from Table 1
- TPA = trees/ac
- DA = drip area expressed as a decimal (i.e 50% = 0.50).

**Phosphorus Management**

Yield-limiting phosphorus (P) deficiency is rarely a concern on Delaware soils. Long-term applications of fertilizers and manures have resulted in P accumulations on many soils that are capable of supplying crop needs for several years with no further additions.

To determine whether P fertilization is necessary for a specific field, conduct a routine soil test. University of Delaware P recommendations for plums are dependent upon the soil test P value and the P requirement of the crop. A summary of P recommendations for commercial plum trees is given in Table 2 below. For best response, P should be applied one month before bloom. To evaluate the effectiveness of the nutrient management program, use tissue testing of leaf samples collected between July 15 and August 15 to determine adjustments for the following year.

As with N, P recommendations are expressed on a per-tree basis and must be recalculated if a broadcast fertilizer program is being followed. To calculate the broadcast application rate for P in lbs P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> /ac, use the equation given above in *Nitrogen*

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**Management - Broadcast Fertilization.** Substitute the recommended rate of  $P_2O_5$  from Table 2 for the variable RNR in the equation.

**Table 2. Phosphorus fertilizer recommendations for individual plum trees in commercial production.**

Tree Status	P Index Value		
	0 - 25	26 - 50	51+
	— lbs $P_2O_5$ / yr of age —		
Non-bearing trees	0.2	0.1	0.0
Bearing trees	0.1	0.05	0.0

### Potassium Management

The need for potassium (K) fertilization of plums is best determined by the use of a routine soil test. Potassium recommendations are based on the soil test K value and the K requirement of the crop. A summary of University of Delaware K rates for plums is given in Table 3. For best response, K should be applied one month before bloom. To evaluate the effectiveness of the nutrient management program, use tissue testing of leaf samples collected between July 15 and August 15 to determine adjustments for the following year.

As with N and P, K recommendations are expressed on a per-tree basis and must be recalculated if a broadcast fertilizer program is being followed. To calculate the broadcast application rate for K in lbs  $K_2O$ /ac, use the equation given above in *Nitrogen Management - Broadcast Fertilization*. Substitute the recommended rate of  $K_2O$  from Table 3 for the variable RNR in the equation.

**Table 3. Potassium fertilizer recommendations for individual plum trees in commercial production.**

Tree Status	K Index Value		
	0 - 25	26 - 50	51+
	— lbs $K_2O$ / yr of age —		
Non-bearing trees	0.2	0.1	0.0
Bearing trees	0.1	0.05	0.0

### Calcium and Magnesium Management

Calcium (Ca) and magnesium (Mg) needs of plums are usually met through routine liming. *Magnesium application is recommended if the soil test Mg value is less than 38 FIVs.* If liming has been recommended, use dolomitic limestone to raise soil pH and increase soil Mg. If, however, liming is not necessary but Mg fertilization is still indicated, apply soluble Mg as Mg sulfate or Mg chloride to increase soil Mg. Appropriate application rates are given below in Table 4.

**Table 4. Application rates for soluble Mg as a function of Mg fertility index value.**

Mg Index Value									
0	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	
— lbs soluble Mg / ac —									
80	70	60	50	50	30	20	10	0	

### Micronutrient Management

An adequate supply of micronutrients is essential for proper growth of plums. Micronutrient deficiencies may occur in plums grown on Delaware soils. Suspected deficiency should be confirmed by tissue analysis. In most cases, confirmed deficiency can be corrected in the current or following season by foliar sprays. Contact your county Cooperative Extension agent for application rates and times.

### Other Nutrients

No other nutrients are known to be limiting to commercial plum production in Delaware.

### Additional Information

See Soil Test Notes 1 (Appendix X) and Extension Bulletin 40-R, *Commercial Tree Fruit Production Recommendations*, for additional information concerning nutrient management in commercial plum production.