

water and nutrients. It should not be allowed to grow in the area beneath the canopy of the trees. Keep weeds and grass out of the area from the trunk to the drip line of tree branches by cultivating, hoeing and/or mulching or as a last resort carefully chosen herbicides. Mulches such as straw, lawn clippings, leaves, or black plastic prevent competition from weeds as well as conserve moisture. To avoid creating an ideal nesting area for mice, mulch should be removed in late fall and replaced in early spring. Also, mulch should not be placed too close to the base of tree trunks.

### Fertilization

Almost any type of fertilizer may be used on fruit trees. Complete mixes which are used on lawns (i.e., 5-10-10) are satisfactory. Organic materials may be substituted for commercial fertilizer recommendations, but it is important to provide the same quantities of plant nutrients.

After the ground has settled around newly planted trees (usually 2 weeks after planting), apply 1 pound of 5-10-10 per tree (or equivalent amount of another mix). Broadcast the fertilizer around each tree, but keep it away from the base of the trunk.

Nitrogen is the main element governing growth response. In February or March of each succeeding year, apply 1 pound of 5-10-10 per apple tree for each year of tree age and 1 1/2 pounds of 5-10-10 per peach, cherry or plum tree for each year of tree age. Do not increase the rate after 10 years, but continue yearly applications. As trees become larger, always fertilize all the ground area covered by the limbs. Reduced rates of nitrogen should be used on pear trees because of their susceptibility to fireblight.

Test the soil every 4 to 5 years, and apply additional lime or other nutrients as needed. Terminal growth and general vigor of individual trees should be observed closely. Where growth the past year was short, increase the amount of fertilizer slightly. If growth was excessive, reduce the rate. Fertilizer rates can be fine-tuned even further by sampling leaves for tissue analysis. (Check with your County Extension office for more information.)

### Irrigation

While the total annual rainfall in West Virginia appears to be adequate water for tree growth and fruit production, precipitation is not uniformly distributed throughout the growing season. There are usually periods of moisture stress each time weekly rainfall totals fall much below one inch.

Although fruit trees can withstand long periods of drought, irrigation is very beneficial during certain critical stages of tree growth. Irrigation is especially advantageous on bearing trees during the 6-week period prior to ripening and on young trees during any dry period of the summer. To conserve water, trickle irrigation is much preferable to overhead irrigation.