

Fertilizing Boxwood Shrubs
Mott's Nursery and Supply
A Guide For Homeowners in Indianapolis, IN

Boxwoods

Boxwoods (*Buxus spp.*) are extremely popular in landscapes and are among the most widely grown shrubs in the US. They grow well in a wide range of climatic conditions from Zones 4 through 9, depending on the species or variety.

Boxwoods are slow-growing evergreens with shallow root systems with nutrient uptake just beneath the soil surface. With proper timing, fertilizer choice, and application, your boxwoods will reward you with deep green, dense foliage and robust health.

Primary Nutrient Needs

Boxwoods tolerate a wide range of soil types (as long as they are well-drained) with a preference for slightly acidic to neutral soil pH (5.5–7.5).

- **Nitrogen (N)** for lush green leaf growth (high rates may cause excessive growth)
- **Phosphorus (P)** needed but generally in lesser amounts
- **Potassium (K)** for drought and cold hardiness
- **Micronutrients** like magnesium and calcium support color and cell strength

For best results a **soil test** every three years is recommended to guide fertilization and pH adjustments. In the absence of a soil test, a general rate of 1 pound per 100 square feet of a general-purpose fertilizer such as 10-10-10 or 14-14-14 may be applied. These are balanced fertilizers with equal amounts of N-P-K. It may be helpful to remember that 2 cups of granular fertilizer is equal roughly to 1 pound.

When to Apply (Indianapolis, Zone 6a)

- Early spring (late March–early April)—just before new growth begins and soil is warming. An optional application may be made ~8 weeks later if growth is desired.
- Optionally, late fall (October–early November)—promotes root growth over winter; avoid new shoot flush late in fall (risk of frost damage).
- Avoid fertilizing in mid-summer through late summer, which may stimulate tender new growth that could be injured by frost.

How Much & How to Apply

- Follow label rates. Most granular and slow-release formulas recommend ~1 lb per 100 square foot but always consult the product label. Organic composts and manures require 10-25 pounds per 100 square feet (consult label directions).
- Broadcast lightly on top of the mulch, not under it, and never directly on roots, stems, etc.
- Distribute just beyond the drip line (edge of the canopy, and extend outward one to two feet, since feeder roots extend past the canopy).
- Hand application is the most common method for small plantings.
- Use a measuring cup or scoop to ensure proper dosage based on the fertilizer label.
- Use gloves and avoid inhalation or ingestion, store fertilizer safely and wash hands after use.

Frequency

Typically, fertilize boxwoods once per year with granular or slow-release fertilizer. If using an organic option, plants may benefit from a second application ~8 weeks later if growth is desired.

Application Summary

- **When:** Early spring (late March–April); optionally, a fall application (Oct. to Nov.).
- **What:** Slow-release, granular, or organic compost or manure. An analysis of 10-6-4, or balanced fertilizer of 10-10-10, 14-14-14, etc. See chart below.
- **Rate:** Approximately 1 lb/100 sq ft (adjust per label); apply around drip line out ~1-2 feet. Organic composts/manures require 10 to 25 lbs. per 100 sq. ft.
- **Method:** Broadcast on mulch surface; keep 2–3" from trunk of the plant.
- **Safety:** Wear gloves, avoid leaf/skin contact, store securely, wash hands.

Precautions & Safety

- **Over-fertilization risks:** root burn, brown or scorched foliage burn.
- **Avoid placing fertilizer on trunk or foliage**—can cause burn.
- **Avoid fertilizing in hot summer or late summer**, as tender new shoots may be damaged in the coming cold weather of late fall and winter.
- **Soil pH** should remain in range (5.5–7.5); if pH is low (<5.5), apply dolomitic lime; if too high, apply iron sulfate per soil test. Soil pH affects the availability of nutrients to plants.

Quick Check & Tips

- ✓ Soil test done every 3 years.
- ✓ Watch for signs of yellowing (N deficiency) or poor growth.
- ✓ Mulch layer 2–3" thick; apply fertilizer *on top*, not beneath the mulch.
- ✓ Avoided fertilizing in midsummer or late fall.

Fertilizer Types & Comparison

Fertilizer Type	Pros	Cons
Slow-release granules (e.g. 10-6-4, 10-10-10, 14-14-14)	Releases steadily over several months; low risk of burn; one application per year.	More expensive. Cost is more than double regular granular.
Granular (e.g. 10-6-4 or 10-10-10, 14-14-14))	Lower cost; nutrients available quickly; good for recently planted shrubs.	May require 2 nd application in late fall; does not last as long as slow-release.
Organic compost/manure (must be properly aged)	Improves soil structure; slowly delivers nutrients; adds micronutrients; safer to handle.	Requires two applications (~8 weeks apart); low nutrient density; requires 10-25 lbs. per 100 sq. ft.