

Fertility Management of Drip-Irrigated Vegetables

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Summary

Drip irrigation provides an efficient method of fertilizer delivery virtually free of cultural constraints that characterize other production systems. Achieving maximum fertigation efficiency requires knowledge of crop nutrient requirements, soil nutrient supply, fertilizer injection technology, irrigation scheduling, and crop and soil monitoring techniques. If properly managed, fertigation through drip irrigation lines can reduce overall fertilizer application rates and minimize adverse environmental impact of vegetable production.

Drip irrigation allows precise timing and uniform distribution of fertilizer nutrients. Improved efficiency results from small, controlled fertilizer applications throughout the season, in contrast to large preplant or early-season sidedress applications. Fertilizer application through drip irrigation (fertigation) can reduce fertilizer usage and minimize groundwater pollution due to fertilizer leaching from rain or excessive irrigation. Significant technical skill and management are required to achieve optimum performance. The following discussion highlights the main elements of formulating and evaluating a fertigation plan.

Soil nutrient supply

Proper fertigation management begins with knowledge of the nutrient status of the soil. Most soils contain substantial quantities of available macronutrients and are frequently sufficiently supplied with micronutrients; using a standard drip fertigation program without soil testing will often lead to wasteful fertilizer application and, less frequently, result in a nutrient deficiency. Analytical procedures for soil analysis differ widely from location to location; it is important to employ a laboratory using test procedures calibrated for the geographic area of interest.

Both mineral ($\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ and $\text{NH}_4\text{-N}$) and organic forms of N are present in all soils. Analysis for mineral N often is confined to $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$, because in most situations $\text{NH}_4\text{-N}$ constitutes <20% of mineral N content. Estimating the rate at which soil organic N is mineralized is problematic, but consideration of N mineralization potential can be important; net N mineralization rates of 0.5 to 2.0 $\text{kg N}\cdot\text{ha}^{-1}/\text{day}$ are common (Magdoff, 1991). Provided that the soil is drained adequately, mineralization potential generally increases with increasing organic N content; a low C/N ratio of recently incorporated plant residues and organic amendments also will favor more rapid mineralization.

Unlike $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$, available soil P and K exist in chemical equilibrium with slowly available forms. The most appropriate soil test procedures vary depending on location and soil characteristics. In the Southeast, acidic sandy soils usually are assayed for P and K using the Mehlich I soil test (Hanlon et al., 1990). Neutral or alkaline mineral soils in the West are extracted more appropriately by the bicarbonate and ammonium acetate techniques for P and K, respectively (Reisenauer, 1983). Mineral soils in the West commonly contain sufficient K for maximum vegetable production and, where heavy fertilization has been employed over years, sufficient P as well. Soil supply of K is generally more limited in the Southeast; however, P has accumulated to high levels in many soils used repeatedly for vegetable production.

Crop nutrient requirements

Vegetable crops differ widely in their macronutrient requirements, and in the pattern of uptake over the growing season. In general, N, P and K uptake follows the same course as the rate of crop biomass accumulation. Fruiting crops such as tomato, pepper and melon require relatively little nutrition until flowering, when nutrient uptake accelerates, peaking during fruit set and early fruit bulking. As fruits mature, macronutrient requirement declines. Non-fruiting crops such as celery, lettuce, and cole crops have slow nutrient uptake through the first half of the season, the rate of nutrient acquisition accelerating until just before harvest. Fertilization recommendations, based on research conducted regionally or locally, vary considerable among areas of the country; it is important to recognize these regional difference when formulating a fertigation program.

Nutrients applied through drip irrigation systems

Although most nutrients can be injected successfully into drip irrigation systems, the most often applied nutrients are N and K. Crop requirements for N and K are large relative to other elements, and fertigation provides a system to supply the requirements of the crop in a scheduled fashion during the season. The leaching potential for N on most soils, and for K on sandy soils, makes split applications of these nutrients through a drip system attractive for improving fertilizer efficiency. In addition, there are few precipitation and clogging problems associated with N or K injection.

Phosphorus, Ca, Mg, and micronutrients can be injected successfully into drip irrigation systems if precautions are taken to mitigate against chemical precipitation. Analysis of irrigation water for Ca, Mg, Fe, pH, carbonate, and bicarbonate is important for predicting chemical precipitation problems; the risk of precipitation increases with increasing pH or increasing concentration of these materials. Acids may need to be injected with the fertilizer to maintain high nutrient solubility during fertilizer injection.

Nutrient sources

A variety of fertilizer materials can be injected into drip irrigation systems. Common N sources include urea-ammonium nitrate solutions, ammonium nitrate, calcium nitrate, and potassium nitrate. Potassium can be supplied from potassium chloride, potassium sulfate, potassium thiosulfate, or potassium nitrate. The choice of phosphorus products is more limited; phosphoric acid or ammonium phosphate solutions are used most commonly. Mono ammonium- or mono potassium phosphate are available, but are used infrequently.

The choice of fertilizer suitable for a specific application should be based on several factors: nutrient form, purity, solubility, and cost. The appropriate balance of $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ to $\text{NH}_4\text{-N}$ (or urea) is dependent on environmental conditions. In cool weather, 25-50% of applied N should be in the $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ form (Hochmuth and Hanlon, 1995). In warm weather, nitrification occurs rapidly, allowing greater use of ammoniacal-N or urea fertilizers, which are significantly less expensive than nitrate fertilizers. All common N sources are available in clean, high-analysis, liquid solutions.

Solubility is an issue with potassium products, as are relative salt index and cost. Potassium chloride is inexpensive and reasonably soluble (solutions >10% K are available), but relatively high in salt index. However, the salt index issue is generally not critical if the application rate is limited to the crop requirement. Potassium sulfate is less soluble and more expensive than potassium chloride, but it has a lower salt index. Potassium thiosulfate and nitrate are highly soluble but also are more expensive. Potassium chloride is used commonly for drip injection in the West, whereas potassium nitrate is popular in the Southeast. Although a topic of some controversy, there is no definitive research that documents a need to maintain a certain ratio of N:K fertilizer in vegetable production. As long as soil-test-predicted amounts of K are added, crop K requirements should be satisfied.

Liquid P fertilizers, with the exception of food-grade phosphoric acid, may have impurities which complicate the already difficult task of eliminating chemical precipitation in the drip lines. However, with sufficient knowledge and attention to detail, fertilizer-grade phosphoric acid and ammonium phosphate solutions can be delivered successfully.

Fertigation scheduling

Efficient fertigation scheduling requires attention to three factors: crop- and site-specific nutrient requirements, timing nutrient delivery to meet crop needs, and controlling irrigation to minimize leaching of soluble nutrients below the effective root zone. Seasonal total N, P and K requirements vary considerably by area and soil type (Hochmuth and Hanlon, 1995; Tyler and Lorenz, 1991). General recommendations should be adjusted based on soil test results to estimate seasonal application rates required for a particular field. In many situations a small percentage of N and K (20-30%), and most or all P, is applied in a preplant broadcast or banded application.

Preplant application of N (and K, if needed) is particularly important where initial soil levels are low (Locasio *et al.*, 1982, 1985), or in conditions where early-season irrigation is not required. Preplant application of P is common for several reasons. Soluble P sources (e.g. phosphoric acid) are more expensive than granular forms. The potential problem of chemical precipitation in the drip line is avoided. Also, the movement of drip-applied P away from the point of injection is governed mainly by soil texture and pH. Movement of P is particularly limited in fine-textured, alkaline soils. During the critical crop establishment period, P banded near the developing seedlings may be utilized more efficiently. When making a preplant application of any nutrient it is important that the fertilizer be placed within the wetting zone of the drip system.

Once seasonal N, P and K requirements have been estimated and preplant application (if any) made, the balance of the fertilizer can be delivered through the drip system in multiple applications over the growing season. From crop nutrient uptake characteristics one can apportion fertigation to meet nutrient requirements by crop growth stage. To calculate fertilizer application on the basis of daily or weekly need, one must account for the relative rate of crop development, which is dependent on temperature. Total seasonal crop nutrient requirements are relatively independent of environmental conditions. For example, an early spring melon crop will need roughly as much total N as a mid-summer or fall crop, even though the length of the growing seasons (planting to harvest) will differ significantly.

Ideally, a crop-specific fertigation template could be developed using growing degree day (GDD) information. In practice this is not often done. Alternatively, historical information on crop phenology can be used to construct general fertigation schedules (Table 1); these schedules are based on research and commercial grower experience in Florida (Hochmuth, 1992). For some crop groups, such as cucurbits, extrapolation of the nutrient program for one crop to another crop is possible. These schedules assume the soil will be supplying little of the crop K requirement. It is important to keep in mind that the actual fertilizer requirement may be considerably less, depending on soil test K levels. Similarly, crops grown on soils with high N supply capacity (high organic matter, significant residual mineral N content, etc.) also may require substantially less N fertilizer. These schedules also can be compressed or expanded depending on the length of the growing season.

Application of N and K in excess of crop requirements can have significant adverse consequences in addition to the added fertilizer expense. Nitrate contamination of groundwater has become a serious environmental issue in some areas, and excessive fertigation increases NO₃-N leaching loss (Pier and Doerge, 1995; Thompson & Doerge, 1995). Heavy N application, particularly when NH₄-N predominates, can induce blossom-end rot in crops like tomato and pepper, and stimulate vegetative growth at the expense of fruit yield. Excessive K fertilization has been shown to reduce specific gravity of potato and size of strawberry fruit (Hochmuth *et al.*, 1993; Albrechts *et al.*, 1996).

Nutrients can be injected at various frequencies (daily to bi-monthly), depending on system design constraints, soil type, and grower preference. Frequent injection might be needed on sandy soils that do not retain large amounts of nutrients, and for growers who want to minimize injection pump size and cost.

Fertigation frequency, in most situations, is not as important as achieving a correct rate of application of nutrients to the crop during a specified period (Cook and Sanders, 1991; Locasio and Smajstrla, 1989). Some growers find it easy to fertigate with each irrigation using automated controls, which places small amounts of nutrients at risk of leaching during any single leaching event. Since leaching is possible with drip irrigation, nutrients applied in any irrigation must not be subjected to excessive irrigation either during that application or in subsequent irrigations.

It is possible to inject nutrients in noncontinuous (bulk) or continuous (concentration) fashion. For bulk injection, drip irrigation systems always should be brought up to operating pressure before injecting any fertilizer or chemical. Fertilizer should be injected in a period such that enough time remains to permit complete flushing of the system without overirrigation. On sandy soils in Florida, an overall irrigation cycle of 45 min (young crop) up to 1.5 h (mature crop) would be sufficient (assuming today's typical drip tube flow rates) to apply the amount of water required by a tomato crop during any one irrigation cycle (Clark *et al.*, 1990; Smajstrla *et al.*, 1985). Irrigation cycles >1.5 h for a mature crop on sandy soils run the risk of leaching nutrients and moving water below the root zone. Longer irrigation cycles can be used effectively on soils with high water-holding capacity. More detail on injection calculations and periods is available (Clark *et al.* 1990; Hochmuth and Clark, 1991). It is very important to design the system and fertilizer injector so that injection and flushing can be achieved in a reasonable amount of time without running the risk of overwatering the crop simply to apply the fertilizer.

In some systems, fertilizer is injected continuously (concentration injection) so that all irrigation water applied contains nutrients. This is acceptable as long as no irrigation cycle is so long that nutrients are leached below the root zone. During rainy periods, a bulk injection of a larger amount of fertilizer might be needed to fertilize a crop when no water is required.

Water management is integrally linked to fertigation management. Water that moves below the active crop root zone can carry $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ (and, in very sandy soils, K) in substantial quantities. One cm of leachate at $100 \text{ mg NO}_3\text{-N}\cdot\text{liter}^{-1}$ would contain $10 \text{ kg N}\cdot\text{ha}^{-1}$. Indeed, one of the major advantages of polyethylene bed mulch (frequently used in conjunction with drip irrigation) is the reduction of $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ leaching with precipitation, but that advantage can be negated by excessive drip irrigation. Conversely, in some areas well water used for drip irrigation contains a significant concentration of $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$; in regions such as the Salinas Valley of California $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ levels of $10\text{-}20 \text{ mg}\cdot\text{liter}^{-1}$ are common. Irrigating a crop with a total of 30 cm of water at $15 \text{ mg NO}_3\text{-N}\cdot\text{liter}^{-1}$ would add approximately $45 \text{ kg N}\cdot\text{ha}^{-1}$.

Nutrient monitoring

The fertigation scheduling approach outlined above should, in most situations, supply adequate nutrition; however, monitoring soil and/or plant nutrient status is the essential safeguard to ensure maximum crop productivity. In conventional production, soil $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ testing usually has been limited to preplant sampling; since drip irrigation provides the ability to add N at will, more extensive $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ monitoring is justified. Traditional soil sampling and laboratory analysis offer the most complete, accurate information, but growers are not likely to go to the effort and expense of this technique on an ongoing basis through a cropping cycle.

There are several alternative techniques to aid on-farm nitrogen measurement. One approach is the use of soil solution access tubes, also called suction lysimeters. These devices are simply porous ceramic cups, similar to tensiometer cups, attached to hollow access tubes. The units are installed in the field with the ceramic tips in the active root zone. To collect a sample, a vacuum is applied which draws water from the surrounding soil into the tube. This soil water sample is collected and analyzed for $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ content; the vast majority of mineral N is usually in the nitrate form.

The use of suction lysimetry has serious limitations. There can be large spatial variability; one portion of a field may vary from another and, since $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ moves with the wetting front, there can be stratification of $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ within the bed. This problem can be minimized by using multiple lysimeters per field, but that also greatly increases the effort required, and the cost. Interpretation of results is also problematic. Extensive field data is lacking, but in general, a root zone soil solution $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ concentration $>75 \text{ mg}\cdot\text{liter}^{-1}$ indicates that sufficient N is available to meet immediate plant needs. A lower $\text{NO}_3\text{-N}$ concentration cannot be interpreted directly as N deficiency, given the difficulty of obtaining a sample representative of the whole root zone. Plant tissue analysis would be warranted to confirm crop N status.

Another simple technique for estimating soil nitrate concentration is the 'quick test' procedure described by Hartz (1994). This test has the advantage of measuring NO₃-N in a composite soil sample representative of the root zone, compared to the site-specific measurement of a suction lysimeter. Soil and the NO₃-N extracting solution are measured volumetrically, eliminating the need to dry or weigh soil. The moisture content of soil will affect the test, but moisture content of drip-irrigated soils generally will fall in a relatively narrow range, so the impact will be minor in most cases. Adjusting the test based on soil texture (hence, water-holding capacity) will improve accuracy. In general, soil NO₃-N values above 20 mg•liter⁻¹ indicate sufficient available N to meet immediate plant needs.

Reliance on soil NO₃-N testing is most appropriate early in the crop cycle, when crop N uptake rate is low and the detection of substantial residual NO₃-N can lead to reduced additional N fertigation. By mid-season, crop uptake rates increase and soil NO₃-N concentration correspondingly will change more rapidly. Also, once an extensive root system is developed, many crops can take up N in excess of crop needs (luxury consumption); low late-season soil NO₃-N does not necessarily reflect N deficiency. From mid-season until harvest, plant tissue analysis should be the primary indicator of N status, although soil testing still may be used to identify fields where NO₃-N levels remain high enough to delay additional N application.

Conventional plant tissue analysis, in which tissue is dried, ground and analyzed chemically in a laboratory, is the most accurate way to determine crop nutrient status. Through decades of research, sufficiency guidelines have been developed for most important vegetable crops. These guidelines have been published for vegetables in Florida (Hochmuth *et al.*, 1991) and California (Reisenauer, 1983). Although not specifically developed for drip irrigation, these standards are still generally applicable. Unfortunately, laboratory analysis of dry tissue is relatively costly, and the time lag between sampling and obtaining results can be significant. In recent years there has been increasing interest in on-farm tissue testing, particularly for monitoring drip-irrigated fields. On-farm monitoring usually involves the analysis of NO₃-N and K content of petiole sap; sap analysis for PO4-P is uncommon. Measurement techniques include colorimetric methods, NO₃-N or K test strips (Hochmuth, 1994), or ion-specific electrode (Hartz *et al.*, 1993; Vitosh and Silva, 1994). Although all methods can be used successfully, the ion-specific electrode is the most commonly used approach. Table 2 lists petiole sap NO₃-N and K sufficiency ranges developed under Florida conditions. These values are similar to those developed in California. The appropriate protocol for tissue collection, handling, and analysis is discussed by Hochmuth (1994).

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Table 1. Injection schedules for mulched and drip-irrigated vegetables in Florida.

Crop	Established method ^w	Typical bed spacing (m)	Total nutrients (kg • ha ⁻¹) ^z		Crop development		Injection rate (kg • ha ⁻¹ day ⁻¹)	
			N	K	Stage	Weeks ^{y,x}	N	K
Cantaloupe	TP	1.5	130	110	1	2	1.1	0.9
					2	3	1.7	1.4
					3	3	2.2	1.8
					4	2	1.7	1.4
					5	2	1.1	0.9
Cucumber	S	1.5	130	110	1	1	1.1	0.9
					2	2	1.7	1.4
					3	6	2.2	1.8
					4	1	1.7	1.4
Eggplant	TP	1.8	130	110	1	2	1.1	0.9
					2	2	1.7	1.4
					3	6	2.2	1.8
					4	3	1.7	1.4
Pepper	TP	1.8	180	150	1	2	1.1	0.9
					2	3	1.7	1.4
					3	7	2.2	1.8
					4	1	1.7	1.4
					5	1	1.1	0.9
Tomato	TP	1.8	180	150	1	2	1.1	0.9
					2	3	1.7	1.4
					3	7	2.2	1.8
					4	1	1.7	1.4
Strawberry	TP	1.2	130	120	1	2	0.3	0.3
					2	Feb/Mar	0.8	0.7
					3	All there	0.7	0.6
Summer squash	S	1.5	130	110	1	2	1.1	0.9
					2	2	1.7	1.4
					3	2	2.2	1.8
					4	5	1.7	1.4
					5	1	1.1	0.9
Watermelon	S	2.4	130	110	1	4	1.1	0.9
					2	2	1.7	1.4
					3	2	2.2	1.8
					4	3	1.7	1.4
					5	2	1.1	0.9

^z Includes any starter fertilizer: lb/acre=kg•ha⁻¹ ÷ 1.12; K ÷ 0.83=K₂O.

^y Where 20% of N and K have been applied as starter, N injection may be omitted for the first several weeks.

^x For extended-season crops, N maintenance applications can proceed at 0.5 to 1.5 kg/ha per day. Tissue testing should be used to fine-tune amounts.

^w Establishment method (seed or transplant) might affect the schedule. Transplanting shortens the growth cycle and the injection schedule by 1 to 2 weeks compared to seeding.

Table 2. Sufficiency concentration ranges for plant leaf petiole fresh sap nitrate-nitrogen and potassium for Florida-grown vegetables.

Crop	Growth stage	Nutrient concn			
		PETIOLE SAP (mg•liter ⁻¹)		WHOLE-LEAF DRY WT (g•kg ⁻¹)	
		Nitrate-N	K	N	K
Broccoli and collard	Six-leaf stage	800-1000	NA ^z	35-50	35-45
	Just before first harvest	500-800		30-45	15-40
	First harvest	300-500		30-40	15-40
Cucumber	First blossom	800-1000	NA	40-50	20-30
	Fruit 8 cm long	600-800		25-50	20-30
	First harvest	400-600		25-35	15-25
Eggplant	First fruit (5 cm long)	1200-1600	4500-5000	45-55	45-60
	First harvest	1000-1200	4000-4500	45-50	35-50
	Midharvest	800-1000	3500-4000	35-45	30-40
Muskmelon	First blossom	1000-1200	NA	45-50	50-60
	First fruit (5 cm long)	800-1000		40-50	45-50
	First harvest	700-800		35-45	20-40
Pepper	First flower buds	1400-1600	3200-3500	45-50	50-60
	First open flowers	1400-1600	3000-3200	40-45	45-50
	Fruit half-grown	1200-1400	3000-3200	40-45	40-50
	First harvest	800-1000	2400-3000	35-40	35-45
	Second harvest	500-800	2000-2400	25-30	30-40
Potato	Plants 20 cm tall	1200-1400	4500-5000	30-60	35-60
	First open flowers	1000-1400	4500-5000	30-40	30-50
	50% Flowers open	1000-1200	4000-4500	30-40	30-40
	100% Flowers open	900-1200	3500-4000	25-40	25-40
	Tops falling over	600-900	2500-3000	20-30	15-30
Squash	First blossom	900-1000	NA	30-50	30-50
	First harvest	800-900		30-50	20-30
Tomato (field)	First buds	1000-1200	3500-4000	30-50	40-50
	First open flowers	600-800	3500-4000	35-40	35-40
	Fruit 2 cm in diameter	400-600	3000-3500	35-40	35-40
	Fruit 5 cm in diameter	400-600	3000-3500	30-40	30-40
	First harvest	300-400	2500-3000	25-35	25-35
	Second harvest	200-400	2000-2500	20-35	20-30
Tomato (greenhouse)	Transplant to second cluster	1000-1200	4500-5000	40-60	40-50
	Second cluster to fifth cluster	800-1000	4000-5000	40-50	35-40
	Harvest season (Dec-June)	700-900	3500-4000	35-40	25-35
Watermelon	Vines 15 cm long	1200-1500	4000-5000	50-60	40-50
	First fruit 5 cm long	1000-1200	4000-5000	40-50	35-40
	Fruit one-half mature	800-1000	3500-4000	35-40	25-35
	At first harvest	600-800	3000-3500	30-40	20-30

^z Not available