

Fertigation in Horticulture: Boosting Yields and Quality

Hari Krishna. B¹, A. Sairam², Kadam Praveen Kumar², Manu S. M¹ and Vimal Kumar. C¹

¹ICAR- Indian Agricultural Research Institute, New Delhi, India

²Professor Jayashankar Telangana State Agricultural University, Hyderabad, India

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*Corresponding Author: Hari Krishna. B | Email Address: hari.agricos07@gmail.com

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Abstract

Fertigation has emerged as a vital technique in modern horticulture, enabling the precise and timely supply of nutrients through irrigation water. This integrated approach ensures better nutrient uptake, enhances crop yield, and improves the quality of fruits, vegetables, and ornamental plants. By optimizing water and fertilizer use, fertigation supports sustainable horticultural production and reduces nutrient losses to the environment. This paper discusses the principles, system components, and management practices of fertigation in horticultural crops, along with its impact on productivity, produce quality, and resource efficiency. Advances in automation and sensor-based nutrient delivery systems are also explored as future directions for efficient horticultural fertigation management.

Keywords: Fertigation, horticulture, nutrient uptake, crop yield, fruit quality, water-use efficiency.

Introduction

In modern horticulture, where productivity, quality, and sustainability are the cornerstones of success, fertigation — the combined application of fertilizers and irrigation — has emerged as a game-changer. This technology allows farmers to deliver nutrients and water directly to the plant's root zone in precise amounts, improving nutrient-use efficiency and crop performance. For fruit, vegetable, and ornamental crop growers, fertigation has become more than a management tool — it's a science-driven approach that bridges the gap between high yield and high quality.

India's horticultural landscape, from mango orchards in Maharashtra to tomato fields in Karnataka and rose greenhouses in Telangana, is undergoing a silent revolution powered by fertigation systems. With growing pressure on land and water, fertigation offers an intelligent solution to grow more with less, ensuring that every drop of water and every gram of fertilizer counts.

What is Fertigation?

Fertigation is the process of applying fertilizers through irrigation water, typically in micro-irrigation systems like drip or sprinkler setups. The method enables nutrients to be dissolved and distributed evenly with irrigation water, ensuring uniform nutrient availability across the root zone.

The core components of a fertigation system include:

- **Fertilizer tank or venturi injector:** Mixes soluble fertilizers into irrigation water.

- **Filters:** Prevent clogging of drippers or emitters.
- **Control valves and pressure regulators:** Maintain flow and distribution uniformity.
- **Automation units (optional):** Monitor pH, EC, and nutrient levels for precision delivery.

By integrating fertigation into micro-irrigation systems, farmers can tailor nutrient application according to crop growth stages, soil characteristics, and real-time plant needs.

Why Fertigation is Ideal for Horticultural Crops

Horticultural crops — including fruits, vegetables, spices, flowers, and plantation crops — have intensive nutrient and water requirements. Traditional soil application often leads to uneven fertilizer distribution, nutrient losses through leaching, and delayed plant uptake. Fertigation overcomes these limitations by ensuring that nutrients are available in soluble form right where the roots need them most.

Key benefits include:

1. **Precision Nutrient Management:** Fertigation enables stage-specific feeding — nitrogen during vegetative growth, phosphorus during root development, and potassium during fruiting — optimizing plant nutrition.
2. **Higher Fertilizer-Use Efficiency:** By reducing volatilization and leaching losses, fertigation achieves fertilizer-use efficiencies up to 90%, compared to 40–60% in traditional methods.

3. Improved Yield and Quality: Balanced nutrition through fertigation enhances yield quantity as well as fruit size, color, taste, and shelf life — crucial for market competitiveness.

4. Water Conservation: Combined with drip irrigation, fertigation reduces water use by 30–50% compared to conventional surface irrigation.

5. Environmental Sustainability: Reduced runoff and nitrate leaching help maintain soil and water health, aligning with the principles of climate-smart agriculture.

Fertigation in Action: Success Across Horticultural Crops

1. Fruits

- **Banana:** Farmers in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra using fertigation achieved yield increases of 20–30%, with uniform fruit size and reduced fertilizer waste.
- **Grapes:** Fertigation with potassium nitrate during berry development improves sugar accumulation and quality.
- **Mango:** Split application of nutrients through drip enhances flowering and fruit retention.

2. Vegetables

- **Tomato and Capsicum:** Precise fertigation scheduling enhances nutrient uptake, improves fruit firmness, and reduces blossom-end rot.
- **Cucumber and Melon:** Fertigation systems maintain optimal soil moisture and nutrient balance, leading to higher yields and better fruit uniformity.

3. Flowers and Ornamentals

- **Roses and Gerbera:** Controlled fertigation maintains uniform EC and pH in greenhouse production, enhancing flower size and color.
- **Marigold and Chrysanthemum:** Fertigation promotes uniform flowering and extended shelf life, improving market returns.

4. Plantation Crops

- **Coconut and Arecanut:** Fertigation ensures continuous nutrient supply in sandy soils with low nutrient retention.
- **Coffee:** Drip-fertigation improves vegetative growth and berry filling under hilly terrains.

Scientific Basis of Fertigation Efficiency

Fertigation works on the principle of synchronizing nutrient supply with crop demand. When nutrients are supplied in small, frequent doses (known as *spoon feeding*), plants experience minimal stress and can uptake nutrients more efficiently.

Scientific trials conducted by the Indian Institute of Horticultural Research (IIHR), Bengaluru, and Jain Irrigation Systems Ltd. reveal:

- Up to 40% fertilizer savings compared to traditional application.

- 25–60% increase in yield for horticultural crops under drip-fertigation.
- Improved NPK balance in soil and reduced nutrient leaching.

Moreover, sensors and automation technologies are now being integrated into fertigation systems to monitor real-time pH, EC, and nutrient concentration, ensuring maximum precision.

Challenges and the Way Forward

Despite its proven advantages, fertigation adoption faces several challenges:

- **High initial investment cost** for smallholders.
- **Limited availability** of water-soluble fertilizers in some regions.
- **Knowledge gap** in managing fertigation schedules and maintenance.

To address these issues, the Government of India, through programs like the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY) and the National Mission on Micro Irrigation (NMMI), offers subsidies and training to farmers adopting micro-irrigation and fertigation.

Additionally, public-private partnerships (PPP) involving agritech companies, research institutes, and farmer cooperatives are vital for large-scale adoption. Demonstration projects and mobile-based advisory systems can further bridge the knowledge gap among farmers.

The Future: Smart Fertigation Systems

The next frontier of fertigation lies in automation and digital integration. With IoT-enabled fertigation controllers, farmers can monitor soil moisture, EC, and nutrient levels through mobile applications and adjust fertigation schedules remotely. Artificial intelligence (AI) can predict crop nutrient demand based on growth stages, weather, and soil health data, leading to fully data-driven fertigation systems.

In the near future, smart fertigation will become the norm — ensuring that each crop receives precisely what it needs, when it needs it, with zero waste.

Conclusion

Fertigation represents the perfect blend of efficiency, sustainability, and profitability in horticulture. It's not just a technique but a transformation — one that enables farmers to grow healthier crops, conserve resources, and achieve better returns. As water scarcity intensifies and fertilizer prices rise, the path forward for Indian horticulture is clear: fertigation must become the backbone of modern, high-value farming. By embracing fertigation, India's horticultural sector can achieve its twin goals of feeding its people and sustaining its planet — one drip, one nutrient, and one harvest at a time.

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