

Drip Irrigation and Fertigation in Horticulture

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Water and nutrients are the two most critical inputs in horticulture. With the increasing challenges of climate change, depleting water resources, and rising production costs, farmers must adopt efficient technologies that enhance productivity while conserving natural resources. Among these modern technologies, drip irrigation and fertigation have emerged as revolutionary tools that ensure precise delivery of water and nutrients directly to the plant root zone. These techniques improve crop health, maximize yields, and ensure sustainable use of resources, making them highly suitable for fruits, vegetables, flowers, medicinal, and plantation crops.



Drip Irrigation: A Modern Solution

What is Drip Irrigation?

Drip irrigation is a micro-irrigation system that supplies water slowly and continuously to the root zone through emitters, pipes, and tubes. Unlike flood irrigation, it does not wet the entire field but focuses only on the crop root area.

How Drip Irrigation Works

- A mainline carries water from the source.
- Sub-main and lateral pipes distribute water.
- Drippers or emitters release water drop by drop near the plant base.

Major Components

- Pump unit
- Filters (screen or sand filter)
- Mainline and sub-main pipes
- Lateral pipes
- Emitters
- Valves and pressure gauges

Advantages of Drip Irrigation

1. **Significant Water Savings:** Drip irrigation saves 40–70% more water than traditional methods by reducing evaporation, runoff, and deep percolation.
2. **Increased Yield:** Uniform moisture around the root zone leads to 20–90% higher yields, depending on the crop.
3. **Better Weed Control:** Only the root zone receives water, limiting weed growth in the rest of the field.
4. **Improved Plant Health:** No moisture on leaves



reduces fungal diseases, improving crop quality.

5. **Ideal for All Terrains:** Works efficiently on uneven, hilly, or sandy soils.
6. **Suitable for Water-Scarce Regions:** Maximizes water use efficiency where rainfall is low.

Fertigation: Nutrient Application Through Drip

What is Fertigation?

Fertigation involves injecting water-soluble fertilizers directly into the drip irrigation system. It ensures that nutrients reach the plant roots in the most efficient form.

Types of Fertigation

- **Continuous application:** Fertilizer is applied throughout irrigation.
- **Intermittent application:** Fertilizer is applied in intervals.
- **Proportional application:** Fertilizer quantity matches water flow.

Common Fertilizers Used

- Urea
- Potassium nitrate
- Calcium nitrate
- Water-soluble NPK
- Micronutrient mixtures

Advantages of Fertigation

- ✓ **Higher Nutrient Use Efficiency:** Nutrients are used rapidly by plants due to precise and timely application.
- ✓ **Reduced Fertilizer Wastage:** Losses through leaching, runoff, and volatilization are minimized.
- ✓ **Lower Labor Cost:** Fertilizer application becomes automated.
- ✓ **Better Quality Produce:** Uniform nutrient availability improves fruit size, color, taste, and shelf life.
- ✓ **Environment-Friendly:** Reduces nutrient pollution in soil and water bodies.

Applications in Horticulture

Fruit Crops: Mango, banana, pomegranate, citrus, grape, guava, papaya. Drip and fertigation improve flowering, fruit size, and yield.

Vegetables: Tomato, capsicum, chilli, brinjal, cucurbits, onion. Uniform moisture is essential for quality and reduced cracking.

Floriculture: Rose, gerbera, marigold, chrysanthemum. Drip ensures precise water needs for sensitive flowers.

Plantation Crops: Coconut, arecanut, coffee, tea.

Large spacing crops benefit greatly from localized irrigation.

Economic Benefits for Farmers

- Higher productivity increases overall profitability.
- Reduced input cost due to savings in water, fertilizer, and labor.
- Drip systems have a long life (7–10 years) when maintained properly.
- Government subsidies (40–70%) make drip affordable for small farmers.
- Improves resilience to drought and climate stress.

Modern Technological Integration

1. **Automated Drip Systems:** Timers and controllers manage irrigation schedule automatically.
2. **Sensors:** Soil moisture sensors, tensiometers, and EC meters help in precision irrigation.
3. **Mobile Apps:** Farmers can monitor irrigation using smartphone applications.
4. **Solar-Powered Drip Systems:** Useful for regions with poor electricity supply.



Environmental Impact

- Reduces groundwater depletion
- Prevents soil erosion
- Minimizes fertilizer leaching
- Promotes sustainable agriculture

Challenges in Adoption

- High initial cost
- Need for technical knowledge
- Risk of clogging if filters are not maintained
- Use of only water-soluble fertilizers
- With proper training and support, these challenges can be effectively managed.

Conclusion

Drip irrigation and fertigation have transformed modern horticulture by ensuring water and nutrient efficiency, enhancing crop quality, and promoting sustainable agricultural practices. These technologies are essential for meeting future food demands while conserving water and protecting the environment. By adopting drip and fertigation systems, farmers can achieve higher yields, better quality produce, and long-term profitability. As climate change and water scarcity continue to rise, these modern irrigation systems represent a vital step toward smart, sustainable, and resource-efficient agriculture.

