TRENDS IN AGRICULTURE SCIENCE
ISSN:2583-7850

Popular Article
Domain: Agriculture Science
Vol 4 Issue 8, August 2025, 4018-4022

Integrated Nutrient Management in Vegetable Crops

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DOI:10.5281/TrendsinAgri.16980732

Abstract

Integrated Nutrient Management (INM) is a practical, farmer-friendly approach that blends organic and inorganic nutrient sources to sustain soil fertility, boost crop yield and improve nutrient use efficiency. In vegetable production where short crop cycles, intensive harvesting and diverse crop types put continual pressure on soil INM becomes particularly valuable. This article walks through the principles, components and field-level tactics for INM in vegetable crops, emphasising pragmatic steps growers can adopt without specialized equipment. It includes a practical table of approximate N–P–K recommendations for 20 common vegetables, guidance on soil testing and budgeting, timing and placement strategies and ways to measure success while keeping environmental risks low. The tone is intentionally practical and conversational to make adoption easier for extension workers, progressive farmers and students.

Keywords: Integrated Nutrient Management, vegetables, soil fertility, organic manures, biofertilizers, nutrient budgeting, fertilizer application, nutrient use efficiency

Introduction

Vegetable crops are the workhorses of small farms and kitchen gardens. They feed families, supply markets every day and often carry premium prices but they also demand steady nutrition. Unlike many field crops that have a single major harvest, vegetables often give multiple harvest windows or require repeated fruiting, which can deplete soil nutrients quickly. That's where Integrated Nutrient Management (INM) comes in: rather than relying on a single source of fertilizer, INM combines organic matter, biological inputs and judicious use of mineral fertilizers in a way that feeds both crops and soils over the long term.

Why INM matters for vegetables

Vegetables typically require balanced nutrition for both vegetative growth and high-quality produce. Overuse of chemical fertilizers can give an early growth spurt but leave soil structure, microbial life and long-

Published: 26 August 2025

term productivity worse off. On the flip side, relying solely on farmyard manure or compost can be slow to supply certain nutrients and may not meet peak demand during flowering or fruit development.

INM strikes a middle ground: organic inputs maintain soil health and moisture-holding capacity, biofertilizers support nutrient availability and mineral fertilizers fill short-term nutrient gaps. For vegetables, where speed and quality are both essential, this balance helps maintain yield stability while protecting the soil for future seasons.

Core principles of INM

- **Balance:** Match fertilizer supply to crop demand, taking account of what the soil already provides.
- **Diversity of inputs:** Use a mixcompost, well-rotted farmyard manure, green manures, biofertilizers and mineral fertilizers when required.
- **Soil-first approach:** Treat the soil as the living foundation. Build organic carbon and microbial health to improve nutrient cycling.
- **Precision in timing and placement:** Apply nutrients when and where the plant can access thembasal doses, side-dressing, fertigation or foliar sprays as suitable.
- **Record-keeping and learning:** Keep simple records of yields, inputs and visible responses, so recommendations can be refined over time.

Components of a practical INM program

Organic matter

Compost and well-rotted farmyard manure are the backbone of long-term fertility. They improve soil structure, water retention and cation exchange capacity. For vegetables, apply compost at planting or as a pre-season soil amendment; light top-dressings between crops can also help.

Biofertilizers and green manures

Rhizobial inoculants, phosphobacteria, azotobacter andmycorrhizal inoculants can increase nutrient availability. Leguminous cover crops such as sunn hemp or cowpea can add nitrogen and protect soil between vegetable crops. These tools are especially valuable in organic or low-input systems.

Mineral fertilizers

Use targeted mineral fertilizers (urea, DAP, MOP, SSP, etc.) to meet peak demands. In INM, mineral fertilizers are not the default but the gap-fillersapplied based on soil tests, crop-stage demand and expected yields.

Micronutrients

Vegetable quality can suffer from micronutrient deficiencies (e.g., Zn, B, Fe) and these often show up as poor fruit set or malformed produce. Where deficiency is suspected, use foliar sprays or soil amendments informed by soil/leaf tests.

Soil testing and nutrient budgeting

Before making fertilizer decisions, do a simple soil test. Even a basic test that reports soil pH and available N, P and K helps avoid wasteful applications. Nutrient budgeting means estimating how much the crop will remove and matching that with what's already in the soil plus what will be returned by organic inputs.

A practical nutrient budget has three parts:

1. **Soil supply:** What the tested soil can supply.
2. **Organic inputs:** Nutrients released from compost, manure and green manures during the crop cycle.
3. **Mineral fertilizer required:** The shortfall needed to meet crop demand for the target yield.

Crop-stage focused application

Vegetables respond best when nutrients are available at critical stages: early vegetative growth, pre-flowering and during fruit set. For example, a basal application helps establish seedlings, while side-dressing nitrogen at early flowering supports fruit development. Tailor applications to crop physiologyleafy crops demand steady nitrogen, tuber crops need balanced potassium for storage organ development and fruit crops frequently benefit from a higher potassium supply for quality and shelf-life.

Table: Approximate N–P–K recommendations for 20 common vegetable crops (kg/ha)

S.No	Vegetable Crop	Approx. N (kg/ha)	Approx. P_2O_5 (kg/ha)	Approx. K_2O (kg/ha)
1	Tomato	150–200	75–100	75–100
2	Brinjal (Eggplant)	100–150	60–80	60–80
3	Chilli	100–150	60–80	60–100
4	Capsicum (Bell pepper)	150–200	80–120	100–150
5	Potato	150–200	75–150	200–300
6	Onion	80–120	40–60	40–60
7	Garlic	80–120	40–60	40–60
8	Cabbage	120–160	60–100	80–120
9	Cauliflower	120–180	80–100	100–150
10	Carrot	80–120	60–80	80–100
11	Radish	50–80	30–50	40–60
12	Beetroot	60–90	40–60	80–100
13	Spinach / Leafy greens	80–120	40–60	40–60
14	Okra	80–120	40–60	80–100
15	Pea	20–40	40–60	40–60
16	French bean	20–40	40–60	40–60
17	Cucumber	120–150	50–80	150–200
18	Bitter gourd	100–125	60–80	100–150
19	Bottle gourd	100–125	60–80	100–150
20	Lettuce	80–100	40–60	40–60

Practical field strategies

Starter mix and nursery management: For crops raised in nurseries (tomato, cauliflower, onion seedlings), use a balanced starter mix with moderate nitrogen and adequate phosphorus to promote root growth. Seedling vigour reduces transplant shock and improves nutrient uptake in the field.

Split applications: Rather than applying the full nitrogen dose at planting, split ithalf at basal and the remainder in one or two side-dressings at critical growth stages. Splitting reduces leaching and improves uptake.

Fertigation and drip: Where irrigation systems exist, fertigation offers a precise way to supply nutrients in small, frequent doses especially effective for high-value vegetables. It boosts nutrient use efficiency and reduces surface losses.

Foliar feeding as rescue: A light foliar spray can correct short-term deficiencies during sensitive stages (e.g., flowering). Use foliar feeds as a corrective tool, not as the main source of nutrition.

Measuring success and adjusting

Keep a small notebook or use a simple mobile note to record dates of applications, visible crop responses (leaf colour, flowering, fruit set) and yields. Compare seasons: if yields plateau despite increasing mineral fertilizer, it's often a sign that soil health or other factors (water, pests) are limiting. Adjust plans based on observation, not just habit.

Economic and environmental benefits

INM tends to reduce overall input cost in the medium term, because better soil health and targeted fertilizer use raise nutrient use efficiency. Environmentally, INM reduces the risk of nutrient runoff and groundwater contamination by avoiding blanket over-application of nitrogen and phosphorus. It also builds resilience soils with higher organic matter manage drought and heavy rain better.

Common mistakes and how to avoid them

- **Blind blanket dosing:** Applying the same high dose every season without testing. Do a simple soil test instead.
- **Overreliance on manures alone:** Fresh manures can immobilize nitrogen if not composteduse well-rotted material.
- **Ignoring micronutrients:** If fruit set or quality is poor, test for zinc, boron and iron.
- **Skipping record-keeping:** Without data, it's guesswork. Keep short, consistent logs.

Scaling and community approaches

INM is especially effective when knowledge is shared. Farmer groups can pool composting facilities, share the cost of soil testing and trial small demonstration plots. Local extension services or progressive farmers can host short, focused field days where simple practices (right time for side-dressing, how to judge compost readiness) are demonstrated.

A short, practical checklist for the next crop cycle

1. Do a basic soil test at least once a year.
2. Plan organic amendments and compostapply before planting when possible.
3. Decide target yield and prepare a basic nutrient budget.
4. Split N applications and use side-dressing at flowering/fruit set.
5. Incorporate biofertilizers and use legumes as cover crops where possible.
6. Keep short records and compare seasons.

Conclusion

Integrated Nutrient Management in vegetable crops is not just a set of recommendationsit is an adaptable farming philosophy. It recognises that soil is more than a medium for plant roots; it is a living, breathing ecosystem that supports production now and in the future. By blending the best of organic amendments, biological inputs and mineral fertilizers, INM ensures crops get what they need without overburdening the soil or the environment.

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Published: 26 August 2025