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Soil Tests

If you haven't done so already then before the ground gets hard think about taking a soil test. Fall is a great time to test the soils in gardens, fields or landscape beds and get an accurate read on what might be missing or what you have in excess.

Depending on the size of your area, you should dig in multiple locations to put together one soil test. In a garden you might dig in 5 to 10 spots, a field might have up to 20 locations and a small landscape bed might have 2 to 3. Dig down 6 to 8 inches, remove any organic matter or plant debris from the service and take a one inch slice from the wall of your hole. Do this at every spot and combine this soil in a bucket. Mix the soil thoroughly so there will be a representative sample from the entire area. Let the soil air dry (do not dry in an oven or microwave) and take a bag full of soil, about one pound, to your local extension center for testing.

If there is a spot in your garden that behaves differently than other areas you should consider testing that separately from the overall sample as there could be a chemical difference between the two areas.

Once soil is brought to the extension center the sample will be forwarded to the soil testing lab. Samples are tested and results are sent back to the extension center where a specialist reviews the results for further comments. Final reports will be completed and sent back to you within two weeks.

What you can learn from these results could save you money during the next growing season. Look at the pH, the organic matter and the nutrient levels in the soil. Organic matter (OM) is usually very low, between 1 and 3 percent. Ideally you would like your OM around 12%. If the pH is between 6.5 and 7.0 it will work for you during the next growing season. Exceptions to this are plants that like low pH like dogwoods, azalea and blueberry. If your pH is above 7.0 then you have likely added too much lime in the past and should stop that practice. It will take some years for the pH to come back down.

Fertilizer and limestone recommendations will be listed below the results. For homeowners this will be figured per 1000 square feet. For crops it is shown by the acre.

In general you want to keep your pH balanced, maintain a good amount of organic matter and stay in the medium to high range on nutrition. When you continue to apply fertilizer without knowing what is already in your soil you may be applying when nutrient levels are already in the high range. At this point you run the risk of losing those nutrients before the plants have a chance to absorb them. This equates to a waste of money and time in the purchase and application of fertilizer.

By obtaining a test now, you will get your results back and be able to add amendments before winter, getting a jump start on the spring chores in your yard or field.

University of Missouri Extension programs are open to all.