

Regular Soil Analysis Is Critical To All Homeowners

Many experts recommend that you sample your soil every year. However, for most homeowners, a soil analysis every two to three years is sufficient. The cost of a soil analysis is free to all North Carolinians, and now is a good time to soil sample!

Soil testing can save you time and money. There is no need to apply fertilizer when the plant cannot use it or sufficient quantities already exist in the soil for plant growth. Soil testing is the intelligent, environmentally sound approach to gardening in the '90s. Time spent soil sampling will be repaid many times over in healthier plants, less pest problems and fewer weeds. A soil test is the best way to determine the health of your soil.

The autumn and winter are good times to sample your garden and lawn. Sampling technique is critical in order to gain a valid picture of soil fertility. Define each area that you will be sampling. For example, the average home gardener should take a separate sample for the front yard, rear yard, vegetable garden, rose garden, perennial flower beds, shrub beds, etc...

The objective of soil sampling is to provide a soil sample that will be representative of all the cultivated soil on the site. Soil type in many residential areas is highly variable, so the more subsamples collected, the better the sample. Use a soil probe or small spade to collect the top four inches of soil in established turf gardens.

Collect subsamples in 10 to 12 locations in the site and mix these subsamples together in a plastic bucket. Use a clean plastic bucket; metal or chemically contaminated buckets can give false results on the soil analysis.

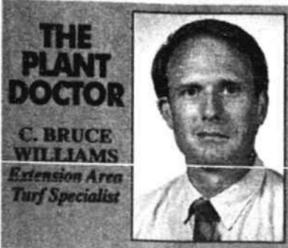
After all subsamples have been collected and thoroughly mixed in the plastic bucket, place at least one heaping cupful of the soil in a sample box. Soil sample boxes can be obtained from your local county Cooperative Extension Service office. Follow instructions on the box and fill in the adjoining information sheet, then return filled sample boxes to your county extension office.

Several weeks after turning in your soil samples, you will receive a computer-generated N.C. Department of Agriculture Soil Test Report. This report can be quite intimidating to the uninformed. For beginners, zero in on the soil pH and the "Suggested Treatment for the First Crop."

The pH is the measure of soil reaction. If the pH is not correct for plant growth, then the fertilizer you apply to the soil is wasted. The pH will determine the ability of the soil to make nutrients available for plant growth.

Plants cannot extract nutrients from soil that is too acid or too alkaline. Unless the pH is adjusted to the correct level, adding extra fertilizer or other amendments is a waste of time. Soil pH is adjusted with either limestone or sulfur. Limestone neutralizes acid soil. Sulfur acidifies alkaline soil.

Use powdered dolomitic agricultural limestone for adjusting pH of new ground or when tilling old plant debris into the ground. Either pelletized or powdered lime is fine for applying to the surface of established lawns or gardens. Most soils in the Cape Fear region are very acidic due to the leaching effect of 50-plus inches of annual rainfall. Some sandy soils can acidify quickly by dropping by as much as 0.5 pH



THE PLANT DOCTOR
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unit in a single season. Extreme care should be used if applying sulfur to acidify a soil, since sulfur has other side effects on the soil in addition to acidification. Sulfur is converted to sulfuric acid in the soil and tends to strip away many nutrients from the soil particles. Excessive or improper sulfur application often leads to all sorts of trace element deficiencies in plant growth. The soil test may also recommend

fertilizer nutrients. Numbers on the fertilizer bag represent the percent nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium contained in the fertilizer. A hundred pound bag of 8-10-12 fertilizer contains 8 pounds of nitrogen, 10 pounds of phosphorus equivalent, and 12 pounds of potassium equivalent. You can achieve the recommended level of fertility in many different ways. For example, the soil analysis may recommend 1.6 pounds of nitrogen and 4.8 pounds of potassium or

20 pounds of 8-0-24 fertilizer per 1,000 square feet of garden or lawn. You can reach the recommended soil fertility by applying 20 pounds of 8-0-24 per 1,000 square feet or 32 pounds of 5-0-15 or 16 pounds of 10-0-30 or 22 pounds of 0-0-22 mixed with 5 pounds of 33-0-0. If you have questions, check with your county extension agent or a reputable garden/farm center since most fertilizer dealers can easily calculate the most economical fertilizer blend to satisfy

your soil test recommendations. Fertilizer should be applied to the soil either prior to or during periods of active growth depending upon the crop. For additional information on proper limestone or fertilizer use, request "Soil Facts: Soil Acidity and Proper Lime Use-AG327(17)" from your county extension office or by sending me a SASE. Send your gardening questions and comments to the Plant Doctor, P.O. Box 109, Bolivia NC 28422.



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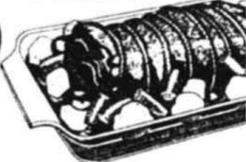
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