



Colorado MASTER GARDENER

Soil Tests

no. 7.726*by D. Whiting, C. Wilson, and A. Card'*

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Value of a Soil Test

In the home garden setting, soil testing is valuable to establish a base line on soil limitations related to pH, salt levels, and the need for phosphate and potash fertilizers. A special lead test would be of concern to homeowners with lead-based paints on older homes.

In some gardening situations, soil testing has limited value. For example, soil testing for nitrogen has limited use for the home gardener since the nitrogen level constantly changes in response to the addition of soil organic matter, soil microorganism activity, temperature and moisture levels; and the lack of ongoing testing by home gardeners to manage nitrogen to precise levels.

The research base for interpreting results is also lacking on landscape plants. For example a test for a maple tree, native plants, or the gardener's favorite peony would simply be based on norms used for general agronomic crops. A research base to interpret needs for micronutrients is limited to specific agronomic and greenhouse crops.

A standard soil test will not identify the most common garden problems related to over-watering, under-watering, poor soil drainage, soil compaction, diseases, insects, weed competition, environmental disorders, too much shade, poor varieties, or just neglect.

Typical Tests

A standard soil test typically includes the following:

- Texture (estimated by the hand-feel method),
- Organic matter (reported as a percent of the total soil),
 - About 2/3 of a pound of nitrogen per 1,000 square feet will be released (mineralized to nitrate) during the growing season for each 1 percent organic matter present.
- pH,
- Lime (CaCO_3 reported by percent),
 - On soils with *free lime*, sulfur will not effectively lower the pH
- Soluble salts (reported in mmhos/cm),
- Nutrients (reported in parts per million).
 - Nitrate nitrogen
 - Phosphorus
 - Potassium
 - Copper
 - Iron
 - Manganese
 - Zinc

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Putting Knowledge to Work

Additional tests could be run for special needs like lead content or sodium problems. For additional details on soil testing, refer to Cooperative Extension fact sheet 0.502, *Soil Test Explanation*.

Frequency

For a gardener on a new site, a soil test gives a useful base line on soil salts, phosphorus, potassium, and pH with *free lime* (or buffer index if acid). In other parts of the country where lime is routinely added to raise the pH on acid soils, a soil test may be need annually. In the neutral and alkaline soils of Colorado, repeat the test when dramatic changes have been made to the soil (such as addition of larger quantities of manure, biosolids, or compost that may be high in salts) or approximately every 4 to 8 years to reestablish the base line.

Taking a Soil Sample

A soil sample may be taken at any time of year, although spring and fall sampling are usually the most convenient. The results of a test are no better than the sample sent to the lab. The sample must be representative of the yard or garden being considered. Gardeners who try to shortcut the sampling procedure will not receive a reliable reading. **A sample should be submitted for each yard area that receives different fertilizer and soil management treatments.** For example, if the front and back lawn would be fertilized the same, the sample should include subsamples taken from each and mixed together. Since garden areas are managed differently from lawns, the garden would be sampled separate from the lawn. Various garden beds that receive differing amounts of fertilizers and soil amendments should be sampled separately. Samples are most easily collected using a soil tube or soil auger. A garden trowel, spade, bulb planter, or large knife also works. Discard any sod, surface vegetation or litter. Sampling depth is critical and varies for the type of test taken and for various labs. Follow sampling depth directions given by the lab.

Table 1. Example of sampling depth for soil test.

Crop	Sampling Depth
Garden (vegetable and flower)	0 through 6 inches
Lawns, new (prior to planting)	0 through 6 inches
Lawns, established	0 through 3 inches
Lead test	0 through ¾ inch

Each sample should be a composite of sub-samples collected from randomly selected spots within the chosen area. Take 5 or more sub-samples from a relatively small area in the home lawn, flower border or vegetable garden. Take 10 to 15 sub-samples for larger areas. Collect the sub-samples in a clean plastic pail; mix the soil thoroughly removing plant debris. Place about one pint of the soil mix into the sample bag or box. Label the sample container (for example front lawn, vegetable garden, flower bed) and keep a record of the area represented by each sample taken. Send the samples to the soil testing lab.

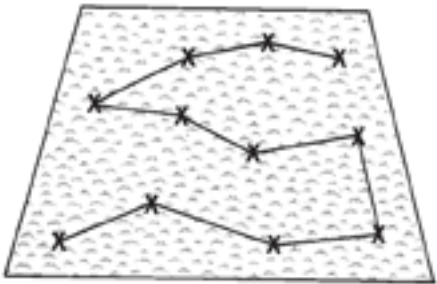


Figure 1. Area to be Sampled (x's are random sample spots).

Many types of chemical solutions may be used to extract nutrients from the soil in the laboratory. Processes used vary from one laboratory to another. Since climate and soil vary considerably in different parts of the country, select a local laboratory that process for the alkaline calcareous soils of the mountain west. Future testing should be done with the same lab in order to make comparisons.

Soil tests are available from many local providers. For a list of labs, refer to Cooperative Extension fact sheet 0.520, *Selecting an Analytical Lab*.

Soil Test Recommendations

In production agriculture, it's not uncommon for a grower or fertilizer dealer to split a sample and send it to different labs. Because individual laboratories do not necessarily use the same soil test procedures, their **availability indexes** (the reported available nutrients) can, and frequently do, differ.

Labs can also differ in the objectives behind their recommendations. For example, are maximum yields the primary objective? In this scenario, fertilizer application will be highest, with increased costs, and higher potential for leaching of fertilizers into ground water. In another scenario, the crop's net return, reducing production (fertilizer) costs, or minimizing potential for ground water pollution may be the primary objective.

Fertilizer practices may also impact recommendations. For example, is the phosphate fertilizer recommendation based on an annual application or a single application to last several years? For a soil test on turf to be established, it's a standard practice to bring the phosphorus to a higher level when the fertilizer can be cultivated through the soil profile before the sod is laid.

Basically, the recommendations resulting from a soil test need to be made by the laboratory doing the work, based on cropping information provided by the grower/gardener. For additional details on soil testing, see fact sheet 0.502, *Soil Test Explanation*.

Home Soil Test Kits

Home soil test kits have questionable value. The actual process used on some procedures is based on soil pH. Most home test kits were designed for acid soils, and would have questionable accuracy on alkaline soils.

Also the accuracy in home soil test procedures may, at best, give a ballpark reading but not precise accuracy. For example, the calibration on a home soil pH kit will tell the gardener that the soil has a pH level between 7 and 8. How close to 7 or 8 makes a huge difference for the growth of some plants. More precise measurement required more expensive equipment. For details, refer to fact sheet 7.727, *Soil pH*.

Colorado Master Gardener training is made possible, in part, by a grant from the Colorado Garden Show, Inc.

¹Colorado State University, Cooperative Extension consumer horticulture specialist and CMG coordinator; C. Wilson, Extension horticulture agent, Denver County; and A. Card, Extension horticulture agent, Boulder County.

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