

The snow is on, and we absolutely do need the moisture. The wood stove still feels mighty good, but gardeners and producers know it is time to be making soil preparations for the 2014 growing season. Just like a solid building begins with a good foundation, a garden or hay patch will produce no better than the soil it has to grow in. Soil testing is not difficult, and probably the best \$10 a grower could spend, especially if you stack it against seed and plant cost, tools, and the countless labor hours spent.

Soil tests provide a scientific basis for evaluating available plant nutrients in cropland, pastures, lawns, and gardens. Analyses of soil samples can help farmers and homeowners fine-tune nutrient applications from fertilizers, biosolids, and animal manure. Properly managing the amount of nutrients added to the soil can save money and protect the environment. Soil nutrients vary by location, slope, soil depth, soil texture, organic matter content, and past management practices, so getting a good soil sample stands out as a major factor affecting the accuracy and usefulness of soil testing.

Getting a representative sample is simple, but not easy. Research at OSU and other universities has clearly shown that a minimum of 20 cores or small samples taken randomly from the field or area of interest are necessary to obtain a sample which will represent an average of the soil in the field. These cores should be collected in a clean plastic bucket (to avoid metal contamination) and mixed thoroughly by hand. The sample bag should be filled from the mixture. A one pint (OSU soil sample bag full) sample is usually adequate for all tests which might be required. If the sample is too wet to mix, it should be spread out to dry some and then mixed, or sampling should be delayed until the field is drier.

It is important to remember that the sample obtained by the above procedure will be an average of the area sampled. If the area sampled is extremely variable in the soil properties which are going to be tested, then it may be better to separate the field into smaller areas, and get a representative (20 cores) sample from each of these areas in order to determine how variable the field is. In this way, it may be possible to treat some areas of the field differently from others and remove variability so that the field can be sampled and treated as a unit in the future. Variability in a field can often be noted by differences in surface soil color and crop growth or yield.

A soil probe is a good tool for obtaining soil samples and is available for borrow from the county extension office. Push the tube to the six-inch depth and remove the core. A sharpshooter shovel can also be used, just remember to use the soil from the top six inches. Soil sample bags are available at the county Extension office. The Extension office will mail your samples to the OSU Soil, Water and Forage Analytical Laboratory and assist you to interpret test results. Please feel free to stop by or contact me if I can be of assistance.

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