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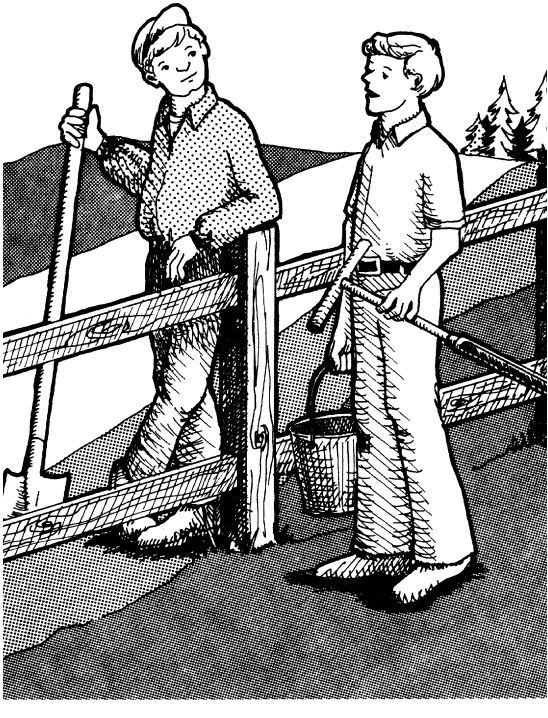
Soil Sampling

for Home Gardens and Small Acreages



OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION SERVICE

Laboratory soil tests will help you develop and maintain more productive soil and increase crop production by providing information on the available nutrient content of your soil. Soil testing helps you select the correct kind and amount of fertilizer and liming material. Recommendations are based on the results of fertilizer experiments, soil surveys, and results obtained by farmers.

A soil sample weighing about 0.5 pound represents from 2 to 40 million pounds of soil in the field. Thus, care in sampling is essential.

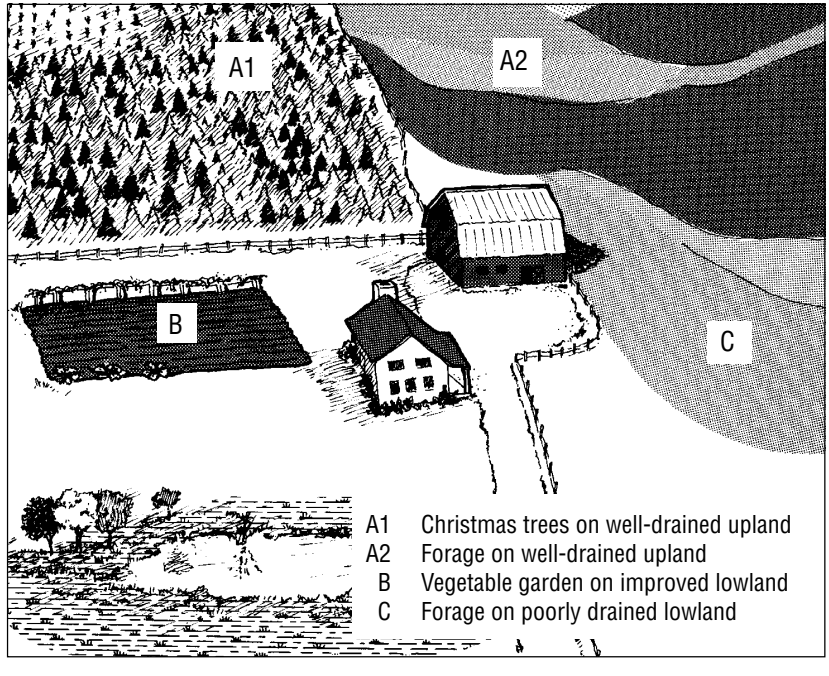
When should I test my soil?

- *For perennial crops* such as orchards, Christmas trees, alfalfa, grass seed, and permanent pasture, the most important time to test the soil is before planting so that necessary nutrients can be mixed into the soil. This test is especially important in acidic soils where liming is likely to be needed. Apply lime and mix it with the soil several months before planting (for example, in the fall for spring planting), since it reacts slowly with the soil. Then:
  - For perennial grass seed, legumes, and pastures, test soil every 3 years after planting.
  - Soil testing usually is not used for established fruit trees, berries, or grapes. Use foliar nutrient analysis instead.
  - Testing soil in timber or Christmas tree plantings usually is not necessary until replanting, unless tree growth is unsatisfactory.
- *For annual crops,* especially vegetables, test soil each year before planting. If you plant successive crops in a single season, you don't need to test before each planting.
- *Additional information* on nutrient testing methods and requirements for various crops is available in OSU Extension publications.

Each soil sample should represent only one soil type or soil condition

The farm in the illustration below has three soil types: A (upland), B (improved lowland), and C (poorly drained lowland). On the upland soil, two areas have different management histories: A1 (Christmas trees) and A2 (pasture).

Sample each soil type (A, B, and C) separately. Areas with different management histories (A1 and A2) also should be sampled separately. In this example, a separate soil sample should be taken from each of the four areas.



How to sample

Sample where the crop will be planted

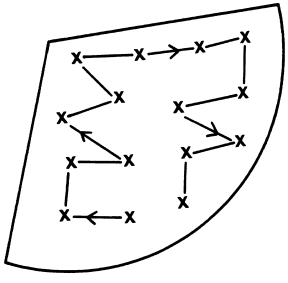
If you are using raised beds, such as for vegetable crops, take your samples in the beds, not in the areas between them.

Avoid unusual areas

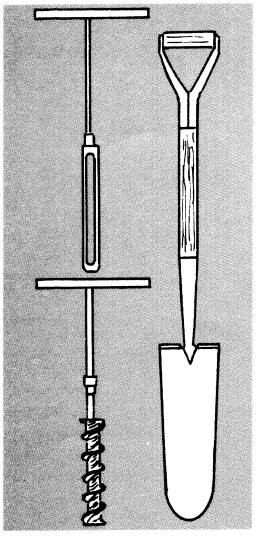
Avoid sampling in small areas where you know that conditions are different than the rest of the field (for example, former manure piles or fertilizer bands). You often can spot these areas by looking for plants growing very well or very poorly.

Take 15 to 20 subsamples

Each sample should consist of subsamples (X) taken from 15 to 20 locations within the sampling area.



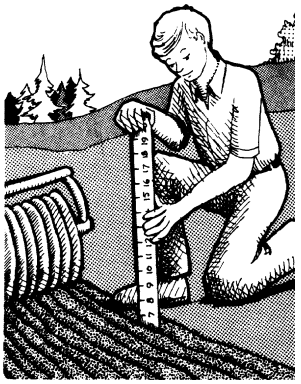
Avoid contaminating the sample



- Use clean sampling tools and avoid contaminating the sample during mixing or packaging. A small amount of fertilizer residue on tools or hands, for instance, can cause serious contamination of the soil sample.
- Do not use galvanized, brass, or bronze sampling tools to collect samples that will be tested for micronutrients such as zinc.

Note: This publication is not intended to be used as guidance for obtaining soil samples for environmental testing.

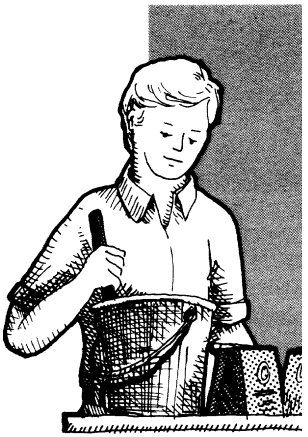
Take the soil sample to the correct depth



- Sample the part of the soil where the plant roots will grow. For most annual and perennial crops, sample from the surface down to about 6 to 9 inches.

Carefully mix the soil sample

Place all of the soil subsamples from a single sampling area in a clean container and mix thoroughly.



Forwarding the soil sample

- A list of laboratories that perform soil tests is available on the Web (http://eesc.oregonstate.edu) or from your county office of the OSU Extension Service.
- Call one or more labs to determine the cost of the soil test you need.
- After choosing a lab, request any necessary paperwork (such as an information sheet), find out how you should prepare and submit the sample, and obtain the address where you should send the sample.
- Prepare and submit the sample according to the instructions. Plastic zipper bags work best; do not use a paper bag. Most laboratories ask you to label the sample bag with identifying information and to fill out and include an information sheet with the sample. Don't forget to include payment.
- Number each sample and keep a record of the fields and areas sampled.

What analysis should I request?

The standard soil test from most laboratories measures organic matter, phosphorus (P), potassium (K), calcium (Ca), magnesium (Mg), sodium (Na), and soil pH (acidity). For acidic soils, the SMP buffer test is the best way to determine how much lime is needed. Certain crops might have higher requirements for specific nutrients. Consult OSU Extension publications to determine whether you should test for nutrients such as sulfur (S), boron (B), or zinc (Zn).

Special soil-sampling techniques sometimes are required

- Nitrate nitrogen soil tests are recommended only for a few crops in eastern Oregon.
- For orchards, leaf sampling is more useful than soil sampling.

This publication, originally prepared by E. Hugh Gardner, former Extension soil science specialist, was revised by Michael Robotham, Extension small farms faculty, Clackamas County, and John Hart, Extension soil science specialist; Oregon State University.

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