

“Get Growing-Soil Savvy”

This week’s column “Get Growing-Soil Savvy” comes from Taylor Hatchett, the new Regional Extension Agent for Bibb County for Home Grounds, Gardens and Home Pests.

As the leaves and temperature continue to fall there is no mistaking the coming of winter. Don’t set down your shovel and grab that mug of hot chocolate just yet though. Fall provides the gardener with the perfect opportunity to prepare the lawn and garden for the upcoming spring.

One of the most critical parts of any garden, whether you are growing roses or turnips or just trying to maintain a beautiful lawn, is the soil. A well maintained “healthy” soil is the first step to successful gardening. So how do you determine the health of your soil? Have it tested! A soil test will determine the pH and fertility of your soil. Just as regular check-ups are important for your health, it is important to have your soil tested once every three years to ensure that you are properly maintaining it.

Everything you need to submit a soil sample is available at your local Extension office. When collecting a soil sample, remember that every square foot of soil can be different so it is essential to take a composite sample. A composite sample is a collection of 15 to 20 uniform cores of soil taken from random spots in the garden, lawn, or shrub bed. After collecting the samples for a given area you should place them in a clean bucket and mix thoroughly. Place about 1 pint of the mixed soil into the soil sample box. In a garden take the core samples from the depth the soil was tilled. In a lawn take the core sample from 2 to 3 inches deep at 15 to 20 spots. Submit separate samples from the front lawn, back lawn, and other areas where soil may differ or where different types of grasses are grown. Be sure to fill in all of the information on the soil sample box and information sheet as completely as possible, and include all of the plants you are growing, or will grow, in the soil tested. The cost is \$8.00 per sample, and once your sample arrives at the lab it takes 3 to 7 days to process.

For each soil sample you submit to the Auburn University Soil Testing Laboratory, you will receive a report that will include soil test results and fertilizer recommendations. Soil pH directly affects the nutrients available to plants and it is the most important element of the soil test.

The pH of a soil is a measure of the soil’s acidity or alkalinity. A pH of 7.0 is neutral, below 7.0 is acidic, and above 7.0 is alkaline. In Alabama, most of our soils are acidic and liming is often necessary in gardens and lawns. Because of the length of time and amount of moisture needed for the lime-soil reaction to raise the pH, fall is the perfect time of year to have your soil tested and begin preparing it for next year’s activities.

When applying lime keep in mind that the most important factor determining its effectiveness is placement. Lime can only be surface applied on already established lawns, and if rain is not in the forecast be sure to water it into the soil.

More information on soil tests can be found in Extension publications ANR-6-B and ANR-388. Publications are available at your local Extension office or can be found at the Alabama Cooperative Extension System website www.aces.edu

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