

Friday's Feature**By****Theresa Friday**

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Don't guess, soil test

With the weather turning warm, Gulf Coast gardeners are getting "itchy green thumbs" about now. When garden fever hits, it's easy to think about exciting things such as new plant varieties and the latest in garden implements. Soil testing seems to get swept under the rug as boring. That's a big mistake.

The condition and type of soil in your garden has a profound effect on the health and growth of your plants. One of the most common mistakes novice gardeners make is putting too little effort into learning about their soil and what is needed for proper bed preparation.

A huge number of the problems that gardeners have each year could be resolved before they start by getting a good soil test and following the resulting recommendations.

The first step in the process is taking a good sample. Sampling is really quite easy. Take a clean plastic bucket and a spade or trowel and get samples four to six inches deep in four or five places in the garden. Put all the samples in the same bucket and mix thoroughly. About two cups of this blended sample will be needed for testing. Be sure to allow the sample to dry thoroughly. Kits to submit soil samples for analysis are available at your local Extension office.

A soil sample could be submitted for testing from each area of your landscape, especially if the soils may be different because of past treatment or location. For instance, one sample could be submitted from your front lawn area and another from a flower bed in the front yard, since the soils would have been treated differently over the years. A soil sample from the back lawn area would generally be very similar to the front lawn, and it would usually not require a separate test.

In just a few weeks, you'll get a report that recommends how to fertilize your garden and whether to add some lime to adjust the soil pH.

Most plants have a range of tolerance to pH. Plant nutrients are generally most available in the pH range of 5.5 to 6.5. This is also a good range for soil bacteria. And, most important, this is the best range for most plants.

If your soil test results call for lime, you'll need to apply it two to three months ahead of starting your garden to be most effective. You can apply it later, though, and still do some good. Ideally, work lime into the soil when you till the garden spot.

Apply phosphorus (the middle number on the fertilizer bag) only if needed according to the soil test recommendations. In some cases your garden soil may not even need phosphorus. Because phosphorus has been implicated as a cause of increased algae growth in surface water, proper phosphorus fertilization is very important.

A soil test will resolve only issues that relate to soil characteristics such as fertility or pH. If you suspect these soil characteristics are causing the problems, a soil test will help you determine if, in fact, they are. Soil tests are not useful if the plants are having problems with insects, diseases or cultural problems, or for testing pesticide or chemical residues.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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