

Spring gardening may seem a ways off, but maybe it's time to start preparing now so that you are not too late when the time comes. Many people call me right before they plant their gardens or even after asking me what they need to fertilize with and how. I can give you a much better answer with much better results if you plan for this garden now.

Knowing what is in your soil and what it needs is a basic and first step to a good crop and plant health. Our plants depend on the soils to provide adequate nutrients with which to grow. We must manage that soil balance for best growth.

Fall or early winter is a great time to do a soil test. It beats the spring rush and gives you time to find and apply what is needed. If lime is required to raise the soil pH, it must be applied several months before it is actually needed to support good spring growth. Lime takes several months to completely react to reduce soil acidity and may cause plant burning if applied when it is very warm outside.

A fall or late-season soil test can also show how well you came through the past growing season. Fall test values should come out mid-range to show that your fertility program was adequate and not too strong or weak. Too strong of a fertility program will cause a buildup of nutrients to test high or very high by fall. It's not like having "too much" money in the bank; this can actually lead to growth problems or groundwater pollution. Too weak a program shows low to very low fall values in a fall test. This indicates that you had run out of good fertility before the end of the growing season and may have weakened the plants.

Soil is tested for potassium, phosphorus, calcium, magnesium and pH among other values in our routine soil test. These major nutrients fuel growth along with nitrogen. Since nitrogen is so transient, we just advise on its use, based on soil type and crop.

If your soil is similar throughout the property, one composite sample from the 4 to 6-inch profile can be used to advise on several crops. List all the crops that you will want fertilizer recommendations or that will grow in that soil sample type. Be crop specific because just listing "Bermuda grass" may be interpreted as a pasture and not a lawn. You are allowed several crops for each sample, so you may put vegetable garden then centipede lawn and peach tree all on one sample if all three crops are grown on this same soil type.

After you send your soil sample off it takes about 7 to 10 days for the analysis to be returned to you. We also get a copy in our office so that if you have any questions about what the analysis recommendation is you can call and we can look at your analysis while we are on the phone and hopefully guide you into having your garden spot ready to grow some outstanding spring vegetables.