

For Great Lawn and Garden Results Starting This Spring – Do a Soil Test

Well, it is officially winter now and all those gorgeous, glossy catalogs from the seed and plant nursery companies are rolling in. Now it is time to plan for next year's garden. There is something you can do now to get a head start on your spring planting. It is the perfect time to get your soil tested!

Soil testing is like checking the gas and oil in your car. You need enough fuel to make a trip, so you check the gas gauge and the oil dipstick. Similarly, a basic soil test will tell you what you need to add to get your best results in your lawn and gardens.

A basic soil test checks soil pH (the degree of alkalinity or acidity) and the level of the three major nutrients that plants need: nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. Since pH, phosphorus, and potassium levels change slowly over time, a soil test every three years will provide a basis for good lawn and garden management.

Plant growth, adding organic matter, or applying a nitrogen fertilizer can rapidly change plant available nitrogen levels in the soil. It is not necessary to perform a soil test to closely monitor nitrogen each year or during a growing season. Instead, aerate the soil by shallow cultivation to promote nitrogen release from organic matter present. Adding a *small* amount of nitrogen fertilizer multiple times during the growing season will also improve plant growth, green color, and help reduce runoff into our streams and lakes.

Follow these steps for getting a good representative sample:

1. Using a trowel or similar tool, obtain samples of soil at a 6" depth. Remove all grass and trash.
2. Each area of interest, such as a lawn or vegetable garden, should be tested separately.
3. Obtain 15-20 random sub-samples from the area you want tested. Divide the area and follow a random pattern when

sampling. Avoid unusual spots (i.e., wet areas) to get a good representative sample. Do not sample any areas that have been fertilized in the past two months as this will give a false reading.

4. Place your sub-samples in a *clean, dry* plastic container. Mix the soil thoroughly by hand and put a pint of this dirt in a zip lock bag. The sample should not be water saturated but, rather, fairly dry.

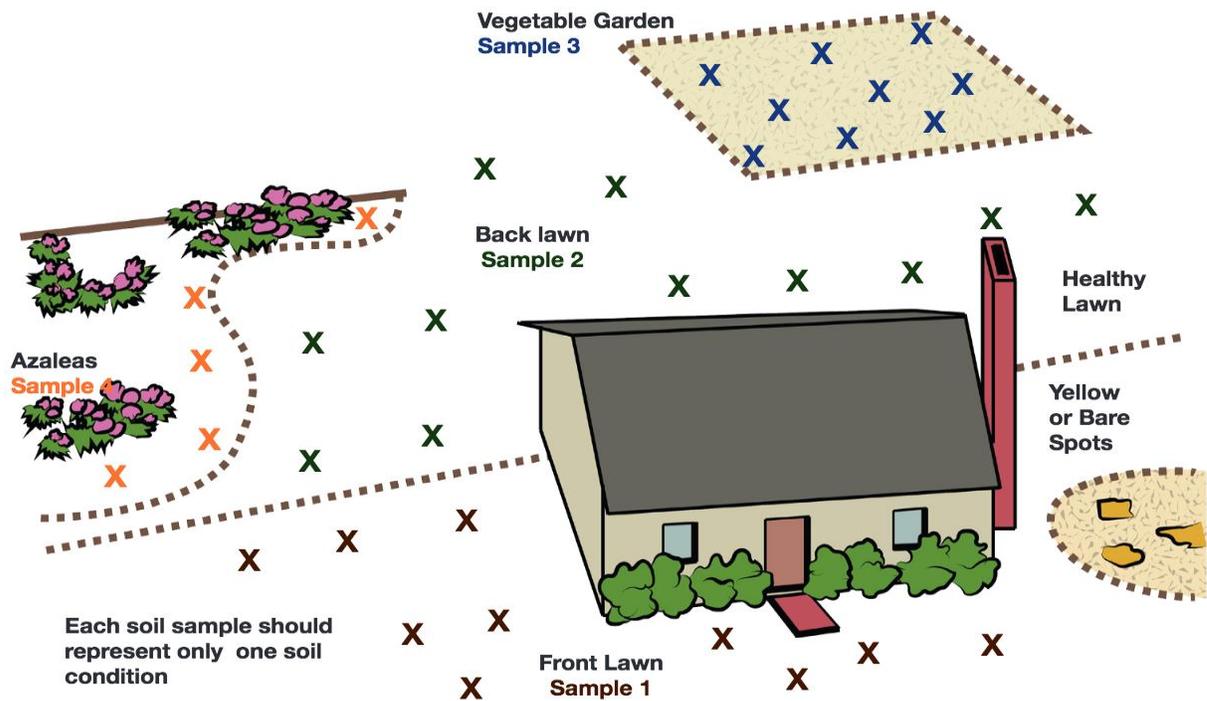


Figure 7.1. Taking soil samples separately to accurately represent pH and soil fertility levels of the vegetable garden, flower bed and lawn.

Bring your soil samples to the OSU Extension Office. The OSU Soil, Water and Forage Analytical Laboratory in Stillwater will do the testing. The cost is \$10.00 per sample, and it generally takes 2-3 weeks for the results to be mailed to you. The test results will show you the levels of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium and the pH of your sample. The lab will also recommend the correct type and amount of fertilizer that should be added to your lawn or garden.



Detailed instructions and videos on how to get a good soil sample and understanding your test results are available on the Tulsa Master Gardener's web site at www.tulsamastergardeners.org. On the main web page choose the *Lawn and Garden Help* tab. From there, click on *Soil* then scroll down to the bottom of the page and click on *Click for Soil Test Instructions*.

Soil testing provides you with an accurate basis for applying nutrients to your soil. Effectively managing the amount of nutrients that you add will save you money and help protect the environment.

You can get answers to all your gardening questions by calling the Tulsa Master Gardeners Help Line at 918-746-3701 or by emailing us at mg@tulsamastergardeners.org, or come see us at our Diagnostic Center at 4116 E 15th Street in Tulsa.

Sources:

[E-1003: Oklahoma Homeowner's Manual for Soil and Nutrient Management](#)

[E-1034: Master Gardener's Handbook](#)

[OSU Soil test Instructions](#)

[HLA-6007: Improving Garden Soil Fertility](#)