

DIRT OR SOIL?

Jack G, Garvin, Carroll County Master Gardener Volunteer

Question: How can I find out if I have a good quality soil in my lawn or garden? Can you tell me what I have to do to make sure that my soil is productive and if not, how can I fix it?

Two hundred years ago the renowned botanist, William Bartrand, while touring Georgia wrote that “the Georgia soil was a deep, rich dark mould (soil) on a deep stratum of reddish tenacious clay”. In 1953 Walter Clay Lowdermilk, the famed soil conservationist made an interesting statement: “Civilizations that did not care about their soils inevitably failed, while those civilizations that did care about their soils flourished.” Today when we go out into our garden we do not see the dark mould but the red very tenacious clay. Through erosion and misuse of our soils much of the dark mould has washed out to sea and the historic average of 4-6% organic matter has been reduced to less than 1%. Many of my fellow Master Gardeners over the years have built up their garden plots by adding organic material to the soil, tilling and working the soil. Amending the soil with compost that has been produced in their compost bins thus, limiting the petroleum based fertilizers added to the soil. This brings to mind the old adage that “the best fertilizer is the gardener’s footstep”.

Last fall I had opportunity to visit an English gentleman that graduated from the Master Gardener course with me. He and his good wife built up a horse boarding business in rural Carroll County. He collected the byproducts of the horses (manure) and stored them in compost bins. During the summer they had added kitchen scrap to the pile and about midsummer they noticed three volunteer tomato plants that had appeared atop their compost pile. These three volunteer plants grew and spread out to about 20 feet in diameter and produced 100 pounds plus of tomatoes, producing well into the fall. I became a compost believer. This year they planted tomatoes on purpose in the compost bin and have had even a better result

One of the best things one can do in preparation for a bountiful garden or a beautiful, envied lawn is to do a soil sample test. Bring the sample to the AG Center at 900 Newnan Road, here in Carrollton. For a very nominal fee the sample is sent to the University of Georgia for analysis. The test results will give you the pH of the soil and the Phosphorus, Potassium, Calcium, Magnesium, and Zinc levels. The test results also tell you what you need to add and how much in order to have a balanced soil.

In order to have thriving microorganisms in the soil, you need to have a pH between 6.0 and 7.0. Also between 6 and 7 pH most plants are able to take up the nutrients from the soil efficiently, thus giving you healthy, thriving plants and lawn.

One of the most popular questions we have while manning the Master Gardener desk at the Ag Center is how to do a soil sample. For lawn samples you want to sample 4" down and for garden samples you dig 6" down. Choose 8 to 10 random and spread out places in either the lawn or garden (do not mix the two areas). Take a garden spade and dig in about 4" or 6" depending on what you are sampling, push the spade forward exposing the cut edge of soil and then with a clean trowel or spatula, remove about a ¼" slice of the exposed soil and place it in a clean pan or bucket and move onto the next site. Once you have sampled the areas, mix the samples well, remove any rocks or debris, and place the soil on a newspaper to dry. Once dry, bring about a quart size bag of the soil to the Ag Center and we will send it off for results which can be emailed directly to you. The BEST time to do soil samples is the FALL, thus giving you time to add the nutrients needed and letting them dissolve into the soil.

There is a new Master Gardener class starting in February. Apply now, come and have fun and learn. Find out why our motto is: "Life Long Learning."

For more information or any other gardening questions, call 770-836-8546 and ask a Master Gardener in the UGA Extension Office at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.