

Ask a Master Gardener
February 16, 2016
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A Dirty Lesson

Q. I'm going to lay sod in my front yard this weekend. I need to get my soil tested pronto so I'll know what to add to it. What do I do? Eddie E.

A. First, slow down and let's read a little bit about dirt. Anything, whether organic or chemical, that you add to your soil won't change its chemical composition for about 3-4 months. That's how long it takes for the ground to absorb it and for added matter to change the pH of your soil.

It's the pH in your soil that you are trying to adjust. If your pH is out of whack 50% of the fertilizer you put down will not be used by your lawn, shrubs, vegetables and/or flowers. Nutrients can't be absorbed if the soil in which they are planted is either too acidic or too alkaline for that particular plant. For example azaleas, blueberry bushes and potatoes like soil with a pH of 5 – 5.5. Most garden crops want the soil pH to be 5.5 – 6.5. Adding lime to the soil can change the pH.

First, let's discover what pH means. An explanation even I can understand is this: the "p" represents power, or potential, while the "H" stands for Hydrogen or a concentration of hydrogen ions in the soil. The pH scale as you remember from school measures the acidity and alkalinity of everything. It ranges from 1-14. To give you an idea: Gastric stomach acid has a pH of 1; water is neutral with a pH of 7; and bleach has a pH of 13.

Remember litmus strips? You dipped them in solutions to determine their pH. If put in an acid like orange juice they turned pink, and if put into ammonia they turned blue.

Soil needs to be between 5.5 – 6.5 pH to make fertilizer and other natural organic material available to most plants. This is called lightly acid soil and in Northwest Georgia usually involves adding lime to our naturally acid Georgia red clay. You can purchase pelletized lime at any garden store. You want to specify the pellets because the powder is a mess to handle and you will have as much on you as on the ground.

How do you find out how much to use? Here's where your tax dollars work for you. All over the United States state universities provide services to citizens about thousands of topics through their "Cooperative Extension". The UGA Cooperative Extension has an office in Carroll County (an "extension" of the University of Georgia) where you can bring soil samples which will be mailed to Athens, GA, analyzed, and a report mailed or emailed to you with information on what to add to your soil.

To get a soil sample from your property that will be usable for analyzing you must take 6-10 samples from your lawn, or garden. Dig down about 4 inches for lawns (no, they don't want the actual grass, just the dirt) and 6" for gardens and wander all around getting

samples from all over the area. In order not to contaminate your soil, use a clean, washed spade or trowel and put your dry soil in a clean container.

Mix your soil samples from each area together thoroughly. Note, don't mix your vegetable soil with your lawn soil! Keep each area's dirt separate. Bring at least a pint of each dry sample in a new quart plastic bag (say, a pint from the lawn, a pint from the garden, a pint from your shade garden), to the county Extension office. Write on each bag where it came from and what you want to grow in that area. Maybe you want to keep growing what you have – zoysia grass, or tomatoes – label it accordingly. If you want to try a new crop write on the bag what the new crop will be.

The Carroll County UGA Extension office is located at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton. Open weekdays 8am-12pm and 1pm-5pm. The staff there will ask you for name, address and phone number and fill up a small brown bag with each of your soil samples. Samples are mailed to UGA's Soil lab where they will be analyzed and results returned by the following week. Staff will e-mail or mail you the results including tables showing what and how much to add to your garden areas or lawn.

For more information contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546 or ccmg@uga.edu, or visit the office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.