

Test garden and lawn soils now

By Jerry Clark, Agriculture Agent

The growing season may have ended (November) in the Chippewa Valley, but that doesn't mean the lawn and garden work is done. Many garden tasks completed this fall will make next spring less hectic and, in most cases, your plants and landscape look better. One task encouraged to get completed in the fall is soil testing. As long as the soil hasn't frozen yet, you can still get your soils sampled and tested for nutrients and be ready for spring 2021.

Lawn and garden problems can be caused by a variety of issues such as plant diseases and nutrient deficiencies, which can look similar. Soil testing offers homeowners a way to get at the root of some of the issues by assessing the nutrient status and soil conditions in their lawn or garden. Visual clues can provide some insight into soil texture and organic matter levels; however, soil testing is the best way to determine fertilizer needs of gardens and turfgrass. Laboratory soil tests provide a great deal of accuracy and quality control not available through other methods of evaluating soil nutrient levels.

An accurate soil test starts with a good, composite sample of the lawn or garden. Fall is great time to pull and submit the samples as the results can be used to prepare for spring. Soils tend to be drier and more firm in the fall so pulling the samples is easier. Soil probes and bags are available from many Division of Extension county offices.

To pull the sample, use a soil probe or a plastic pipe to drive into the soil. Depth of the sample should be to the depth of your tillage for a garden or about 4 inches for an established lawn. Pull the probe out and put the soil core into a bucket. Do this in 5 to 7 different places in the garden or lawn. Combine all the individual cores into the bucket and mix the soil together. Take about 2 cups of soil out of the bucket for the sample. The sample can be placed into a sandwich bag or a soil bag, if you have one available. Be sure to label the bag with the location and number of the sample such as "garden 1", "lawn 2", etc.

Repeat this procedure for each distinct area of your yard or garden. If you have separate flower beds or gardens or your front yard is much different than your backyard, you will want to submit separate samples for each of those areas. Basically, if you are treating or growing an area differently, you will want a separate sample for that area.

Once your sample is collected and submitted, results will be sent to you with application recommendations. Soil samples tested in Wisconsin typically include results for soil pH, organic matter, phosphorus and potassium. This information can be used to guide the improvement of garden soil through the addition of amendments and fertilizers. Nitrogen recommendations will be determined by your soil type, plants or crop grown, and organic matter percentage. Your county extension office has information and supplies to collect and submit your soil samples.