Soil Testing
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Now is the time for folks to be thinking about testing their soils. As the weather starts to warm Plants are starting to come out of dormancy and the soils are beginning to warm. As plants break dormancy the requirements for nutrients from the soil increase dramatically, which means you need to have adequate amounts of nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, sulfur etc., readily available if plants are to be healthy and productive.

To help producers know how much of a nutrient is available in the soil and how much may need to be added, it is necessary to test your soils. As to when you should test your soils the following guidelines will be helpful:

• For perennial crops that are to be established such as orchards, timber, Christmas trees, vines, berries, pastures etc., it is best to sample the soil prior to crop establishment. This will allow nutrients to be added and tilled into the soil. This is particularly important where acidic soils are present and lime is to be added.
• For established plantings of perennial legumes like alfalfa and clover and grass pastures, test the soil every three years after planting.
• For annual crops, particularly vegetables and other specialized annual crops, test the soil before planting. If you plant successive crops in a single season, you don’t need to soil test before each planting.
• For timber or Christmas tree plantings, it is usually not necessary to test the soil until replanting, unless tree growth is unsatisfactory.
• For established commercial stands of fruit trees, berries, or grapes, soil testing is usually not done. Nutrient needs are determined through foliar analysis.

Soil sampling is easy to do and the Oregon State University Extension Service has an excellent publication “Soil Sampling for Home Gardens and Small Acreages”, EC 628 that describes how to properly sample your soils. To obtain a free copy of this publication, please contact any OSU Extension Office.

Oregon State University also has a list of Analytical Laboratories Serving Oregon, EM 8677. This listing provides names, addresses and phone numbers of testing laboratories in the state and what tests they perform. To obtain a free copy of this list, please contact any OSU Extension Office.

As to what analysis you should request from a laboratory. The standard soil test from most laboratories measures organic matter, nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, magnesium, sodium, and soil pH (acidity). For acidic soils, the SMP buffer test is the best way to determine how much lime is needed. With respect to nitrogen, this test is more important for annual crops or when establishing new perennial plantings.

Some specialized crops have higher or specialized requirements for certain nutrients, please contact your OSU or WSU Extension Agent for specific recommendations. Also, for Columbia Basin producers, you will want to test for sulfur and if you are growing tree fruits, vines or other high value perennial crops you might want to test for boron and zinc as well.

For further information concerning soil testing, please contact your OSU or WSU Extension Office.

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