March Action List: Soil Testing

45 days and counting to our average last frost date; besides our national “Tax Filing Day”, April 15 usually more pleasantly signals our average last frost day. In the meantime, as seeds are sprouting and plans laid for this year’s garden, one of the most important planning tools for our garden is a soil test. Lea County soils are usually low in some combination of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium depending on the organics incorporated in the area. Soil may also be potentially high in salts, either due to an accumulation of petroleum based (a/k/a all non-organic) fertilizers or the increasing alkalinity our water basin. A soil test is vital to pinpoint not only what is needed but more importantly the proportions required for healthy growth of plants in our gardens and yards.

The soil test is no better than the sample, so most labs recommend:

- You may want to consider submitting a sample from your garden and another sample from the grass yard. Divide your garden/yard into areas, which have the same soil type, color, slope, fertilizer, and crop history.

- Take several, actually up to a dozen or so, core samples from each soil area. Mix these cores thoroughly in a clean plastic or paper container. The soil sample bag should be from one-third to one-half full for a good representative sample.

- As you take the core samples, obtain the dirt from the root zones. For garden areas, target the typical root zone, that soil about six from the surface. On turf areas, sample about four inches deep. To make it is easy, first scrape away the surface debris/mulch and dig a hole down a little past your target zones. Then use a clean spade and take a nice vertical slice of soil from the side of the hole through all the zone depths (ie surface down to six inches or so). Repeat in at least three or four locations and mix these core samples.

- Be sure to label each sample bag with your name and sample identification. The information will give the lab important data that will correspond to the sample I.D. listed on the lab’s information sheet. Most labs include a map with the information sheet. Completing all the data on the information sheet will help insure more accurate and usable results.

- If the soil is damp, be sure to let it air dry before sealing. Most labs ask that samples should be shipped by expedited handling via United Parcel Service, Fed Ex or bus.
The closest lab to our area is A & L Plains Agricultural Laboratories in Lubbock, Texas. Please see their website for complete details: [http://al-labs-plains.com/home/2511973](http://al-labs-plains.com/home/2511973). It would be easy to hand deliver a sample to this lab. The Lea County Extension Office and Seminole, Texas AgriLife Service usually refer to this testing center. New Mexico State University no longer maintains a soil lab, so residents must look to private labs for these services.

My recent read, *Building Soils Naturally* by Phil Nauta, also recommends:


A soil test is one of the best investments to be made for the garden during this month. Results from your soil test may also save you money and effort by applying only what is needed for a vibrant and healthy garden.

If you have questions, don’t hesitate to contact the Horticulture Society at hortsociety@nmjc.edu or call David Hooten at 575-942-1492.

--Shirley Mee