



# Know Your Soil

## Testing Your Soil

Bulletin #2286

### What is a Soil Test?

A routine soil test is a tool to manage the mineral nutrition of growing plants. It is a quick and inexpensive way to check the levels of essential soil nutrients. Soil is sampled and sent to a lab for analysis.

### Why Test the Soil?

Homeowners, farmers and others often test soil from their gardens, yards and fields. The soil tests tell them soil pH and the level of nutrients that are available for plant growth.

The pH of the soil is a measurement of relative acidity. Soils that are too acid are not suitable for most plants.

The amount and balance of nutrients in the soil has an effect on plant growth, too. Low levels slow plant growth. High levels can pollute the environment or cause imbalances. A soil test lets you know if you need to add more nutrients and how much lime and fertilizer, if any, to add. It can save you money and prevent water pollution.

### What Information Does a Soil Test Provide?

The soil test will tell you:

- the soil pH;
- levels of potassium (K), phosphorus (P), calcium (Ca), magnesium (Mg);
- organic matter level;
- if there is lead contamination;
- how much lime and fertilizer (organic or chemical) to add; and
- other management tips for growing your crop.

### How Often Should I Test the Soil?

Test your soil at least once every three years. Keep the test results handy so you can monitor any changes in soil fertility. You may want to test more often if you have a problem area or if you've applied lots of nutrients. Some people test their soil every year to save money on fertilizer, lime and other soil amendments. How often you test depends on the value of the crop and how closely you manage it.

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### What Time of Year Should I Test My Soil?

Recommendations are made for the next growing season, so you should test soil well before the growing season, such as early spring (after the frost is out of the soil) or in the fall before the ground freezes. A soil test usually takes two to three weeks (from shipping to the lab to return of results). Fall sampling will give the same results as spring sampling. With fall sampling, you will get results back in plenty of time for planting.



*A Member of the University of Maine System*

## How Do I Take a Good Soil Sample?

1. Get a Maine Soil Testing Service container and information form from your county Extension office or from the Maine Soil Testing Lab – (207) 581-3591. Some garden centers may carry them as well. (See below for county office listings.)
2. Use a clean spade, trowel or soil probe to sample the soil. Take several samples in different spots to fully represent the garden or field. You will want to sample at rooting zone depth (usually six to eight inches for gardens and three to four inches for sod or turf). Use a clean container to combine all of the samples.
3. Mix the soil thoroughly and fill the sample container with soil.
4. Label the container with your name, address and sample identification.
5. Fill out the information form as completely as possible.
6. Remove the top sheet of the form. Keep this carbon copy for your records.
7. Put the sample container(s) and information (with check or money order) in a mailing container and mail.

*Prepared by Dick Brzozowski, Extension educator, and Bruce Hoskins, assistant scientist, Maine Soil Testing Lab.*



## County Offices

### **Androscoggin and Sagadahoc Counties**

24 Main Street  
Lisbon Falls, ME 04252-1505  
1-800-287-1458 (in Maine) or  
(207) 353-5558

### **Aroostook County**

22 Hall St., Suite 101  
Fort Kent, ME 04743-7131  
1-800-287-1421 (in Maine) or  
(207) 843-3905

PO Box 727, Houlton Rd.  
Presque Isle, ME 04769-0727  
1-800-287-1462 (in Maine) or  
(207) 764-3361

PO Box 8, Central Bldg.  
Houlton, ME 04730-0008  
1-800-287-1469 (in Maine) or  
(207) 532-6548

### **Cumberland County**

PO Box 9300  
Portland, ME 04104-9300  
1-800-287-1471 (in Maine) or  
(207) 780-4205

### **Franklin County**

147 Farmington Falls Road, #2,  
Farmington, ME 04938-6403  
1-800-287-1478 (in Maine) or  
(207) 778-4650

### **Hancock County**

63 Boggy Brook Rd.  
Ellsworth, ME 04605-9540  
1-800-287-1479 (in Maine) or  
(207) 667-8212

### **Kennebec County**

125 State St., 3rd Floor  
Augusta, ME 04330-5692  
1-800-287-1481 (in Maine) or  
(207) 622-7546

### **Knox and Lincoln Counties**

377 Manktown Road  
Waldoboro, ME 04572  
1-800-244-2104 (in Maine) or  
(207) 832-0343

### **Oxford County**

9 Olson Rd.  
South Paris, ME 04281-6402  
1-800-287-1482 (in Maine) or  
(207) 743-6329

### **Penobscot County**

307 Maine Ave.  
Bangor, ME 04401-4331  
1-800-287-1485 (in Maine) or  
(207) 942-7396

### **Piscataquis County**

Court House Complex  
65 East Main St.  
Dover-Foxcroft, ME 04426-1396  
1-800-287-1491 (in Maine) or  
(207) 564-3301

### **Somerset County**

7 County Drive  
Skowhegan, ME 04976-4209  
1-800-287-1495 (in Maine) or  
(207) 474-9622

### **Waldo County**

992 Waterville Rd.  
Waldo, ME 04915-3117  
1-800-287-1426 (in Maine) or  
(207) 342-5971

### **Washington County**

2 Washington Street  
Whitneyville, ME 04654  
1-800-287-1542 (in Maine) or  
(207) 255-3345

### **York County**

41 Shaw's Ridge Road  
Sanford, ME 04073-9502  
1-800-287-1535 (in Maine) or  
(207) 324-2814

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