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Soil Test Interpretation Guide

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Regular soil testing is an important element in nutrient management. You can use soil tests as a diagnostic tool or to identify trends through time. To obtain meaningful test results, you must sample soil correctly, at the same time each year, and you must maintain records. For more information, see EC 628, *How to take a soil sample. . .and why (*see “For more information,” page 7).

Soil testing laboratories use different test methods, which may influence results and sufficiency ranges. Therefore, the sufficiency ranges in this publication are accurate only for the test methods listed.

Soil tests used to evaluate fertility measure the soil nutrients that are expected to become plant-available. They do not measure total amounts of nutrients in the soil. Measurements of total nutrient content are not useful indicators of sufficiency for plant growth, because only a small portion of the nutrients are plant-available.

Adequate soil nutrient levels vary depending on plant species. Similarly, plant tolerance of excessive nutrient levels, nutrient imbalances, or less-than-optimum growing conditions varies. If excessive nutrient levels exist, review management to determine the cause.

Nutrient concentrations vary with soil depth. Depth of sampling, therefore, affects test results. To determine the proper sampling depth, you must consider the purpose of the soil test. To estimate nutrient availability for a crop prior to planting, sample soil to the depth where most root activity will occur. Shallow sampling sometimes is used to evaluate surface conditions in perennial crops where fertilizers have been applied to the soil surface. Deep sampling may be necessary to diagnose problems in orchards.

Soil test values do not vary greatly from year to year. Drastic changes in test values may indicate an unrepresentative soil sample or a laboratory error. When in doubt, submit a new sample or ask the lab to repeat the analysis.

This publication provides general guidelines for interpreting soil test results. Fertilizer guides for many individual crops are available from your county office of the OSU Extension Service or Washington State University Cooperative Extension, or from Extension and Experiment Station Communications, Oregon State University (see “For more information”).

Nitrogen (N)

Plant-available nitrogen (nitrate and ammonium)

Plant-available forms of nitrogen are nitrate (NO_3^--N) and ammonium (NH_4^+-N). Soil concentrations of NO_3^--N and NH_4^+-N depend on biological activity, and therefore fluctuate with changes in conditions such as temperature and moisture. Nitrate is easily leached from the soil with high rainfall or excessive irrigation. Soil tests can determine NO_3^--N and NH_4^+-N concentrations at the time of sampling, but do not reflect future conditions.

When you collect samples for nitrogen testing, keep them cold, or dry them immediately to prevent NO_3^--N and NH_4^+-N concentrations from changing.

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Ammonium-nitrogen (NH_4^+-N)

Ammonium-nitrogen does not accumulate in the soil, as soil temperature and moisture conditions suitable for plant growth also are ideal for conversion of NH_4^+-N to NO_3^--N. Ammonium-nitrogen concentrations of 2–10 ppm are typical. Soil NH_4^+-N levels above 10 ppm may occur in cold or extremely wet soils, or if the soil contains fertilizer residue.

Nitrate-nitrogen (NO_3^--N)

West of the Cascades. Soil nitrate-nitrogen measurements are most useful as a post-harvest "report card" to evaluate N management. Nitrate remaining in the soil after harvest can leach during winter rains, contaminating surface and groundwater. If residual nitrate levels are consistently high, reduce fertilizer N inputs in future growing seasons.

Table 1.—Residual soil nitrate-nitrogen for evaluating N management.

	NO_3^--N in surface foot (ppm)*
low	<10
medium	10–20
high	20–30
excessive	>30

*See Table 13 (page 7) for conversion of ppm to lb/acre.

Mid-season measurement of soil nitrate is used for field corn production. See EM 8650, *The Pre-sidedress Soil Nitrate Test (PSNT) for Western Oregon and Western Washington*, for more information.

East of the Cascades. In arid regions, soil nitrate (NO_3^--N) is evaluated by measuring NO_3^--N to the expected rooting depth of the crop to be grown. If test results are reported in ppm, convert to lb/acre using Table 13 (page 7). Then subtract the soil nitrate from the crop requirement to determine a fertilizer rate.

Failure to account for NO_3^--N in the soil can lead to over-application of nitrogen fertilizers. Also, irrigation water should be analyzed for NO_3^--N content, and fertilizer rates reduced accordingly. Proper irrigation increases N use efficiency and reduces nitrate leaching.

Total nitrogen

Total nitrogen analysis measures N in all organic and inorganic forms. Total nitrogen does *not* indicate plant-available N, and is not included in standard soil testing programs.

A typical agricultural soil in the Willamette Valley contains about 0.10 to 0.15 percent N, or approximately 5,000 lb N/acre in the surface foot. Only 1 to 4 percent of this total N becomes plant-available during a growing season. East of the Cascades, soils tend to have smaller amounts of total N.

Total N analysis, while not recommended as part of a standard soil testing program, may be better than organic matter analysis for estimating soil N supplying capability.

Phosphorus (P)

The Bray P1 (for acid soils) and the Olsen sodium bicarbonate ($NaHCO_3$) (for alkaline soils) tests estimate plant-available phosphorus. Soil testing laboratories also use several other extraction methods. For interpretation of results from other extraction methods, contact the laboratory that performed the analysis.

Phosphorus soil tests are an index of P availability. The test values cannot be used to calculate available lb P_2O_5/acre.

When sampling soil, you must be aware of previous P management. Phosphorus is relatively immobile in soil. If phosphorus has been applied in a fertilizer band, concentrations of P may persist where the band was placed. Avoid fertilizer bands when collecting soil samples.

Table 2.—Phosphorus soil test.

	West of Cascades (Bray P1 test) ppm P	East of Cascades (Olsen test) ppm P
low	<20	<10
medium	20–40	10–20
high	40–100	20–40
excessive	>100	>40

The phosphorus application rate necessary to correct P deficiencies varies depending on soil properties. Phosphorus availability decreases in cool, wet soils. In many situations, banded phosphorus applications are more effective than broadcast applications.

Phosphorus applications generally are not recommended if tests are high or excessive. High soil phosphorus combined with surface runoff can cause excessive growth of plants and algae in surface waters, damaging aquatic ecosystems.

Cations

Of the three primary cations (potassium, calcium, and magnesium), potassium requires the most management attention. Few crops have responded to calcium and magnesium in the Pacific Northwest.

If extremely high levels of a single cation exist, plant deficiencies of other cations may occur due to competition for plant uptake.

The soil test ranges in Tables 3, 4, and 5 are for the ammonium acetate extraction method. If a sodium bicarbonate ($NaHCO_3$) extraction is used, test values may be slightly lower.

Potassium (K)

Excessive soil potassium levels can result in elevated K levels in grass forage crops, which may be detrimental to animal health.

Table 3.—Extractable potassium (K).

	K
low	<150 ppm* <0.4 meq/100 g soil
medium	150–250 ppm 0.4–0.6 meq/100 g soil
high	250–800 ppm 0.6–2.0 meq/100 g soil
excessive	>800 ppm >2.0 meq/100 g soil

*See Table 13 (page 7) for conversions from ppm to meq/100 g soil.

Calcium (Ca)

Calcium deficiencies usually are found only on very acid soils. They can be corrected by liming with calcium carbonate ($CaCO_3$).

Table 4.—Extractable calcium (Ca).

	Ca
low	<1,000 ppm* <5 meq/100 g soil
medium	1,000–2,000 ppm 5–10 meq/100 g soil
high	>2,000 ppm >10 meq/100 g soil

*See Table 13 (page 7) for conversions from ppm to meq/100 g soil.

Magnesium (Mg)

Magnesium deficiencies on acid soils can be corrected by liming with dolomitic lime.

Magnesium toxicity can occur on serpentine soils in southwest Oregon.

Table 5.—Extractable magnesium (Mg).

	Mg
low	<60 ppm* <0.5 meq/100 g soil
medium	60–180 ppm 0.5–1.5 meq/100 g soil
high	>180 ppm > 1.5 meq/100 g soil

*See Table 13 (page 7) for conversions from ppm to meq/100 g soil.

Sulfate-sulfur (SO_4^{2-}-S)

Plants absorb sulfur in the sulfate (SO_4^{2-}-S) form. In high rainfall areas west of the Cascades, SO_4^{2-} is readily leached, and soil test data are not well correlated with plant growth. In arid regions east of the Cascades, soil test information may be useful. Also, irrigation water may contain significant amounts of sulfate-sulfur. Plant analysis often is useful for diagnosing sulfur deficiency.

Table 6.—Sulfate-sulfur, east of the Cascades.

	SO_4^{2-}-S (ppm)
low	<2
medium	2–10
sufficient	>10

Micronutrients

Deficiencies of micronutrients other than boron and zinc are uncommon. Availability of most micronutrients is largely pH-dependent; availability decreases as pH increases (except for molybdenum, which becomes more available as pH increases). Deficiencies rarely occur in soils with pH below 6.5.

Soil testing for micronutrients other than boron and zinc is recommended only when a deficiency is suspected. If you suspect a micronutrient deficiency, plant tissue testing may be a better diagnostic tool than soil testing.

Boron (B)

Crops such as alfalfa, table beets, brassicas, caneberries, and root crops have responded to boron fertilization on B-deficient soils in western Oregon. Tree fruits and alfalfa are examples of crops sensitive to low boron levels east of the Cascades.

While low levels of boron may limit plant growth, high concentrations can be toxic. When applying boron, apply uniformly and mix thoroughly with the soil.

Table 7.—Boron by the hot water extraction method.*

	B (ppm)
low	<0.5
medium	0.5–2
high	>2

*The hot water extraction method for boron may result in incorrectly high values on soils with high organic matter content.

Zinc (Zn)

Zinc values above 1.0 ppm using the DTPA extraction method are sufficient. Zinc deficiencies have been identified in some crops in certain regions. Corn, beans, grapes, hops, onions, and deciduous fruit trees are especially sensitive to low levels of available zinc. Deficiencies sometimes are associated with high soil P concentrations, soils high in fine clay and silt, or soils with high pH.

Copper (Cu)

Copper values above 0.6 ppm using the DTPA extraction method are sufficient. Copper deficiencies are uncommon. Deficiencies have been identified on muck soils such as those in the Klamath area in Oregon and the Colville area in Washington.

Manganese (Mn)

Manganese values above 1.5 ppm using the DTPA extraction method are sufficient. Manganese deficiencies generally occur only in soils with pH 7.0 or above. Manganese toxicity may occur on acid soils. On alkaline soils east of the Cascades, Mn availability may increase in acidified microzones where fertilizers have been placed. These acidified microzones can alleviate Mn deficiencies sometimes encountered on high pH soils. In some instances, however, acidic microzones can result in Mn toxicity.

Iron (Fe)

Soil testing for iron is not recommended. Most test methods do not discern between forms of iron, and therefore have little meaning for plant nutrition.

Iron deficiencies are uncommon on acid soils in the Pacific Northwest. Where deficiencies occur, they often are associated with acid soil plants, such as azaleas or rhododendrons, growing on soils with unsuitably high pH. Acidifying fertilizers such as ammonium sulfate will help correct problems.

Iron applications on alkaline soils are inefficient unless a chelated form is used. Lowering soil pH to increase iron availability on a field scale is not economical. However, adding acidifying materials such as elemental sulfur to fertilizer mixes can acidify microzones around the fertilizer material and increase Fe availability.

Foliar applications of Fe sometimes are used to correct deficiencies in fruit, turf, and other high-value crops.

Molybdenum (Mo)

Soil Mo concentrations are too low for most labs to evaluate. Molybdenum deficiencies are rare, and are of concern mostly for leguminous crops. Molybdenum-deficient legumes appear chlorotic. Liming to raise soil pH may alleviate deficiencies. Molybdenum-coated seed also can be used.

Excessive molybdenum in forage can harm animal health. If you suspect excessive molybdenum in your forage, determine Mo content by forage analysis.

Chloride (Cl^-)

Soil testing for chloride is not a common practice, and little data exists for interpretation of test results. Evidence indicates that wheat sometimes benefits from chloride applications. The values in Table 8 are based on wheat research in Montana and South Dakota. Little information exists on chloride soil testing in Washington and Oregon.

Table 8.—Chloride soil test ranges for wheat in Montana and South Dakota, 2-foot sampling depth.

	ppm	lb/acre
low	0–4	0–32
medium	4–8	32–64
high	>8	>64

pH, lime requirement (LR)

Soil pH is a measure of soil acidity. Most crops grow best if the soil pH is between 6.0 and 7.5.

Table 9.—Soil pH ranges.

	pH
strongly acid	below 5.1
moderately acid	5.2–6.0
slightly acid	6.1–6.5
neutral	6.6–7.3
moderately alkaline	7.4–8.4
strongly alkaline	above 8.5

Soil pH can be increased by liming. The soil pH test indicates *if* lime is needed. The lime requirement test determines *how much* lime is needed. Accurate lime recommendations cannot be made without performing an SMP or similar test.

SMP* lime requirement test

The SMP lime requirement test is used to estimate the amount of lime required to raise the pH of 6 inches of soil. The SMP test is performed by mixing soil with a buffered pH 7.5 solution and determining the pH of the mixture. During the reaction, the soil's reserve acidity lowers the pH of the SMP solution. Soils with low SMP values have high reserve acidity and high lime requirements.

Some soils may have a low pH (<5.5) and a fairly high SMP buffer value (>6.2). This condition can be caused by the application of fertilizer. In this case, the low pH value is temporary, and the pH of the soil will increase as the fertilizer completes its reaction with the soil.

Sandy soils also may have a low pH and high SMP buffer value. This condition occurs because sandy soils have low amounts of reserve acidity due to low cation exchange capacity (CEC). In such cases, a light application of lime (1 to 2 t/a) should suffice to neutralize soil acidity.

Table 10 is used to determine the amount of lime required, based on the SMP test, to raise soil pH to a desired level. The target pH is determined by the crop to be grown and possibly by other factors.

*SMP stands for Shoemaker, MacLean, and Pratt—the people who developed the test.

Without an SMP or similar test, there is no way to know how much lime is required to adjust soil pH to a desired level. Accurate lime recommendations cannot be made solely on the basis of soil pH.

Table 10.—SMP lime requirement—field scale.

SMP buffer	Tons/acre of 100-score lime needed to raise pH of surface 6 inches of soil to the following pH's			
	5.3	**5.6**	**6.0**	**6.4**
6.7	—	—	—	—
6.6	—	—	—	1.1
6.5	—	—	1.0	1.7
6.4	—	—	1.1	2.2
6.3	—	—	1.5	2.7
6.2	—	1.0	2.0	3.2
6.1	—	1.4	2.4	3.7
6.0	1.0	1.7	2.9	4.2
5.9	1.4	2.1	3.3	4.7
5.8	1.7	2.5	3.7	5.3
5.7	2.0	2.8	4.2	5.8
5.6	2.3	3.2	4.6	6.3
5.5	2.6	3.6	5.1	6.8
5.4	2.9	3.9	5.5	7.3
5.3	3.2	4.3	6.0	7.8
5.2	3.6	4.7	6.4	8.3
5.1	3.9	5.0	6.9	8.9
5.0	4.2	5.4	7.3	9.4
4.9	4.5	5.8	7.7	9.9
4.8	4.8	6.2	8.2	10.4

Example: If the "SMP buffer" value is 5.9, the amount of lime needed to raise the pH to 6.0 is 3.3 tons of 100-score lime/acre.

Table 11.—SMP lime requirement—gardens.

If the SMP lime requirement test is	Apply this amount of lime (lb/1,000 ft^2)
5.4 or below	250
5.5–6.0	150–250
6.0–6.5	100–150
above 6.5	0

Some plants, such as blueberries, rhododendrons, azaleas, and cranberries, grow best in acid soils. Fertilizers such as ammonium sulfate can help maintain acidic conditions.

Sodium (Na)

Sodium is not a plant nutrient and therefore is not necessary for plant growth. High levels of sodium are detrimental to soil tilth and plant growth.

Sodium levels are evaluated based on Exchangeable Sodium Percentage (ESP). The ESP is the percent of the cation exchange capacity (CEC) occupied by Na.

ESP values above 10 percent are of concern. Excessive sodium levels can occur naturally or can result from irrigation with high-sodium water. Reclamation involves establishment of drainage followed by gypsum application and leaching with low-sodium water.

Soluble salts (SS)

Soluble salt problems usually are associated with arid regions such as eastern Oregon and Washington. Soils with high levels of soluble salts are called saline soils. Soils high in sodium are called sodic soils (see "Sodium"). Saline-sodic soils are high in both soluble salts and sodium. Soluble salts are measured by electrical conductivity (EC) of a saturated paste soil extract.

Table 12.—Soluble salts.

	Conductivity (mmhos/cm*)	ppm salt**
low	<1.0	<640
medium	1.0–2.0	640–1,280
high	>2.0	>1,280

*mmhos/cm is equivalent to decisiemen/m.

**Multiply mmhos/cm by 640 to estimate ppm salt.

Because salts move readily with water, salt problems often are transient. Salt toxicity can occur, and salts may leach before soil is tested. Low salt values, therefore, do not always rule out salt toxicity as a cause of problems.

Salt tolerance varies greatly among plant species. Seedlings are especially sensitive to high salt concentrations. Excessive salts may inhibit seed germination. Excessive fertilization and poor irrigation water quality are sources of salts.

Organic matter

Maintenance of soil organic matter is one of the most important goals of soil management. Accurate measurement of soil organic matter is difficult.

Many laboratory methods are used. Most methods are indirect; they measure soil carbon and make an assumption about the percent carbon content of organic matter. The Walkley-Black method is common and gives consistent results. The loss on ignition method can give inconsistent results and tends to overestimate organic matter.

When estimating potential nitrogen release of a soil, total N testing is preferred to organic matter determination. Neither approach provides accurate estimates of soil N availability. If you are monitoring changes in organic matter over time, use the same lab for all analyses.

Cation exchange capacity (CEC)

CEC is a measure of a soil's capacity to retain and release elements such as K, Ca, Mg, and Na. Soils with high clay or organic matter content tend to have a high CEC. Sandy soils have a low CEC. Soil CEC is relatively constant over time, so there is no need for repeated analyses.

CEC often is determined by the ammonium acetate (NH_4OAc) or sodium acetate (NaOAc) methods. While these methods are standard in many regions, there are potential sources of error. Errors are most likely to occur for soils containing appreciable amounts of $CaCO_3$ or gypsum.

Some labs estimate CEC based on soil texture, organic matter content, cations, and pH. Such estimates often are inaccurate. The "sum of bases" method for calculating CEC of alkaline soils can give inaccurate results, especially if there are significant amounts of free $CaCO_3$.

CEC determination can be important for predicting behavior of pesticides and other chemicals in soils.

Base saturation

Base saturation is the percentage of the CEC that is occupied by cations other than hydrogen (H) and aluminum (Al). Soils with low base saturation generally are acidic. Base saturation and pH increase together.

For more information

Hart, J. *Analytical Laboratories Serving Oregon*, FG 74 (Oregon State University, Corvallis, reprinted 1997). No charge

Hart, J. *How to take a soil sample. . .and why*, EC 628 (Oregon State University, Corvallis, revised 1995). No charge

Marx, E.S., N.W. Christensen, J. Hart, M. Gangwer, C.G. Cogger, and A.I. Bary, *The Pre-sidedress Soil Nitrate Test (PSNT) for Western Oregon and Western Washington*, EM 8650 (Oregon State University, Corvallis, reprinted 1997). 75¢

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Table 13.—Conversions.

To convert column 1 into column 2, *divide* by	**Column 1**	**Column 2**	**To convert column 2 into column 1, *multiply* by**
390	ppm K	meq K/100 g soil	390
200	ppm Ca	meq Ca/100 g soil	200
121	ppm Mg	meq Mg/100 g soil	121
230	ppm Na	meq Na/100 g soil	230
1	meq/100 g soil	cmol/kg soil	1
2*	lb/acre (7 inch depth)	ppm	2*
3.65*	lb/acre (1 foot depth)	ppm	3.65*
43.56	lb/acre	lb/1,000 sq ft	43.56
43,560	square feet	acres	43,560
2.471	acres	hectares	2.471

*These values vary with soil bulk density.

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