

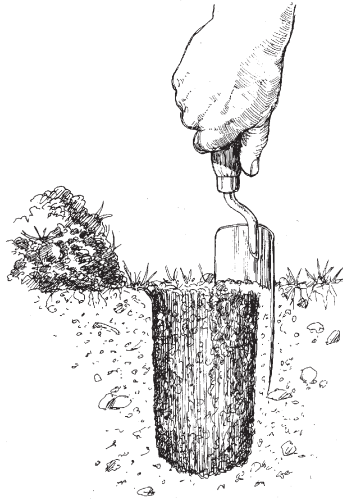
Preparing for a Soil Test

Every few years and when starting a new vegetable garden, test the soil to check its fertility and pH. Adequate fertility ensures that necessary nutrients are in the soil, and proper pH makes it possible for plants to use those nutrients. It also provides a friendly environment for beneficial soil microorganisms. Late summer and autumn are good times to sample soil. Soil-testing laboratories

are usually not as busy, so you can have your results in hand in plenty of time to mix necessary amendments into the soil before spring planting. You can have your soil tested by your local Agricultural Extension Office as well as at private testing laboratories. A good test takes your region's climate and soil into account.

1 defining the test area

The area to be tested must have relatively uniform ground conditions. If your garden consists of two or more large areas where soil conditions obviously differ, each of the areas will require a separate test. Avoid sampling where you previously had a compost pile or where you fill your fertilizer or lime spreader. Also avoid sampling near boundaries. Test your lawn soil separately.



2 taking soil samples

Because laboratories use only a small amount of soil for the actual test—one cup is usually enough. To account for small differences in the test area, you will need to take at least a half-dozen samples from various spots within the area.

The roots of most vegetables feed in the top six inches of the soil, so each sample must be six inches deep. Brush aside any manure, compost, or plant residues on the surface of the soil, dig a hole with a trowel, then slice a uniformly thick section of soil along one side of the hole.

For lawn samples, remove the surface layer of sod first, then sample to a depth of two inches.



3 mixing the sample

As you collect the samples, dump them into a clean plastic bucket. Mix them thoroughly to average out differences, and discard any large stones or debris. Then remove about a cup of soil for the test. Spread the cupful of soil on a clean baking pan to air-dry for a day. Avoid contaminating the blended sample by touching it too much with your hands or with unclean utensils.

4 preparing the sample for shipment

Carefully follow any packing instructions provided by the soil-testing laboratory. If you are having more than one area analyzed, label each sample before mailing it, make a note of its location on your property.

The testing laboratory may request additional information, such as how you fertilized the garden in the past and what you intend to grow. Indicate whether you want special tests, such as micronutrients or toxic elements. Your results will give you specific recommendations for fertilizing and for altering or maintaining the pH.

