

Extension Notes

Personal Column for October 7, 2009

By Gary Hall, ISU Regional Extension Education Director

Fall Is a Good Time to Amend Soils

As the gardening season comes to an end with a killing freeze this fall, it's a prime opportunity to start working on improving the garden for next spring. After the garden has been cleaned of all plant material, it's a good time to amend the soil.

A soil test is a good place to start to determine what amendments or fertilizers are needed in the garden. A basic soil test will include pH, soil texture, organic matter and various major nutrients (N, P, and K). Remember that the soil test is only as good as the soil sample that it represents. Taking a little time in getting a sample that truly represents the area you want tested is a good investment. Your local Extension office has more information on how to take a soil test and where to send the soil to be tested.

Ideally the soil pH should be in a range between 6.5 and 7.3 for most garden plants. If the pH of the soil is too acid (below a pH of 6) limestone will help to raise the pH and adding elemental sulfur will help reduce the soil pH if the soil is too alkaline (above 7.5). Most plant nutrients are available in this range of pH. Changing the soil pH is a slow process, by starting in the fall you will get a head start for the next growing season.

Fall is a good time to incorporate organic materials into the garden. Organic matter will help improve the water holding capacity of the soil, improve the soil structure which can help improve the drainage of the soil, and also help improve the fertility of the soil by slowly releasing nutrients as the organic material decomposes. Start your own compost pile. Also, many communities have composted lawn clippings. Apply the organic matter based on nutrient content instead of volume. Till the material into the soil so that the microbes can start to break it down this fall and you can have a great garden next summer.

###

Contact: Gary Hall, 2023 S Federal Ave, Mason City, IA 50401, 641-423-0844,
garyhall@iastate.edu