Soil Sampling for Home Lawns & Gardens

Stephen Brown, Horticulture Agent
Kim Cooprider, Peggy Cruz

Soil pH is the most commonly-used index of soil acidity or alkalinity. Soil pH is measured on a scale of from 0 to 14, or from most acidic to most alkaline. (Figure 1.) Certain elements that are essential to plant nutrition are influenced by soil pH so it is important to know your soil pH and the pH preferred by the plants you wish to grow.

**Figure 1.**

The pH Scale

[Diagram of the pH scale with a range from 0 to 14, labeled as acid to alkaline]

The Lee County Extension office will test soil pH for free. Bring your sample(s) into the Extension Office at 3406 Palm Beach Blvd. by 5 p.m. on Wednesday. Results will be available when the Horticulture department opens at 9 a.m. Friday. One cup of soil from each area to be tested is needed. Please read the following directions for taking a good soil sample.

**Taking a good sample**

The benefits of a soil test depend on a good sample. The sample should represent the area it is taken from. Otherwise, the results may have little or no value.

- **Timing**
  - For a flowerbed or vegetable garden, take a soil sample a few months before planting. In that way, you have enough time to adjust the soil before you plant.
  - Sample established areas—lawns, trees, shrubbery, and other perennials—once every three or four years.
  - If lime or elemental sulfur have recently been added to the soil, wait at least six to eight weeks before sampling.
• **Sample each unique area separately**
  For each unique area (lawn, vegetable garden or perennial garden) take six to eight subsamples and combine them to make one sample for that area. (Figure 2.)
  If one area of your yard seems healthy and another has bare or yellow patches, sample healthy and unhealthy areas separately even if both are used for the same kind of planting.

  ![Figure 2. Unique areas to sample in a home landscape](image)

• **Take each sample to the appropriate depth**
  For lawns, sample to a depth of four inches, excluding any turf thatch.
  For vegetable and flower gardens, sample to a depth of four to six inches.
  For shrubbery, remove any mulch or surface debris, then sample to a depth of four to six inches around the base of plants.

• **Mix each sample well**
  Place all the subsamples for a unique area in a plastic bucket and mix thoroughly.
  From this mixture, place approximately one cup in a clean container.