

For Vermont Standard

For June 2 --Sage Sassafras column on gardening

What's the Dirt?

Have you ever picked up a bag of fertilizer or plant food that references acidic or alkaline and suddenly you're shaking because it's sounding awfully like that chemistry class too many years ago?

Yes, pH and other factors come into play in the garden. Soil is a garden's foundation; if soil is healthy, hopefully what you grow will be healthy.

To find out what's in the dirt request a soil testing kit from the University of Vermont Extension Agricultural and Environmental Testing Lab www.uvm.edu/pss/ag_testing. Download the form or call 802-656-3030.

A basic soil test for \$14 measures the pH, available P (Phosphorous), K (Potassium), Ca (Calcium), Mg (Magnesium), S (Sulfur), micronutrients, CEC (Cation Exchange Capacity), BS (Base Saturation Ratio), organic matter and recommendations for one crop (additional recommendations are \$2 each). There's also a test for heavy metals (Cadmium, Chromium, Nickel, Lead) for an additional \$10.00. Instructions are included.

A report comes in about two weeks and offers specific recommendations on how to amend soils based on test results. Advanced testing will measure nutrient levels, textural class analysis, and cation exchange capacity. Levels of toxic metals can be tested for only \$10 more; this test is highly recommended for soil in old orchards, farms or suburbia.

Here's a short list for reading up on soil: *Edaphos, Dynamics of a Natural Soil System*, by Paul D. Sachs, The Edaphic Press, Newbury VT, 1993 and *Start With The Soil: The Organic Gardener's Guide to Improving Soil for Higher Yields, More Beautiful Flowers, and a Healthy Easy Care Garden*, by Grace Gershuny. Rodale Press. 1993

In the meantime, happy gardening. Check www.woodstockgardenclub.org for gardening ideas and remember that Mother Nature needs all the attention we can pay her.