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Crop and Soils, Horticulture

Fall Chores, continued…

A couple of weeks ago, the fall chores list was all about trees and flowers. This week, soil preparation work is the focus.

Soil testing is an often overlooked fall chore. Testing in the fall allows time to correct soil fertility issues that a soil test late in the spring may not. For example, addition of organic matter is best done in the fall. Waiting until a soil test confirms the need for additional organic matter in the spring doesn't allow time to collect and apply material, let alone do much correction.

A representative soil sample consists of collecting soil from several locations in the garden or lawn, with each sample being taken from the soil surface to a depth of six to eight inches deep. When possible, use a soil probe (available for checkout via a Meadowlark Extension District Office) to collect samples. Otherwise, use a shovel to dig straight down into the soil. Shave a small layer off the back of the hole for your sample. Mix the samples together in a clean plastic container and submit a pint jar's worth of soil.

Soil tests cost $14/sample through any Meadowlark Extension District Office. Remember: a soil test determines fertility problems, not other conditions that may exist such as poor drainage, poor soil structure, soil borne diseases or insects, chemical contaminants or damage, or shade with root competition from other plants.

Fall is also a great time to prepare gardens for planting next spring as well, for a number of different reason. First, soils at this time of year are typically drier, allowing work to be done when soil moisture is appropriate. Freeze/thaw activity over the winter can also help break tilled soils down even further, leaving a mellow soil the following spring. Second, fall tillage can disturb insects that like to hide in garden debris, reducing their ability to survive the winter. It also allows the incorporation of plant debris, reducing disease levels that can survive the winter while adding valuable organic matter to the soil.

Last, but not least, fall is an excellent time to add organic matter. As referenced before, fall gives us a longer time frame over which to allow organic matter to break down in the soil and provides a great opportunity for material incorporation when soils are dry. Fall also gives us plenty of readily available organic materials like leaves, rotten hay or silage, or grass clippings as well as fresher material that can be added with more success in the fall than in the spring. As a general rule, add two inches of organic material to the surface of the soil and till it in. Only till until soil particles are the size of grape nuts or larger. Working to dust destroys soil structure.