

Organic Land Care *with*



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www.organiclandcare.org

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Dear members and friends of SOUL,

Today you are looking at the SOUL newsletter in a new format.

We have been searching for a better and more environmentally friendly way to put together a relevant publication that is, at the same time, cost and time effective, and easy to produce and to reproduce.

This new two-sided version will now be published monthly. It can be conveniently read on-line, can be attached to e-mails, or can be printed off to hand out, to insert into other publications, or to be kept in a binder for ongoing reference. The SOUL newsletter will continue to feature timely, informative articles on organic gardens and landscapes. It will also supply contacts and membership information, acknowledge supporting members, refer the public to the SOUL web site, and list upcoming meetings and events.

Like SOUL itself, this newsletter is part of a dynamic development. Our goal is education and support in the transition towards Organic Land Care. Change is a natural part of this process – and if you would like to comment on the changed newsletter format, just drop us a line, we'll appreciate it!

Yours truly,

*Christina Nikolic
Stewardship Natural Landscape Design
SOUL President 2005/06*

Soil Testing (Part V)

Testing for pH by Heide Hermary

Heide Hermary is president of Gaia College Inc. She can be reached at heide.hermary@gaiacollege.ca

So far we have discussed how soil fertility works, useful soil tests for organically managed landscapes, and the limitations of soil nitrogen and mineral nutrient tests. Now to the last of the common soil tests: pH.

Once again we need to ask: how **meaningful** is a soil pH test in the **organic** management of landscapes?

pH tests can in fact be very useful, but **NOT** in the way they are commonly used! You know the routine: based on your pH test you add mineral fertilizers (usually dolomite lime on the West Coast, or sulfur in the Interior) to your lawn or garden in an attempt to neutralize the pH.

Used this way the pH test is being substituted for a mineral nutrient test – and that’s not what it measures! What it does measure is how much hydrogen your soil contains, not the amount of lime or sulfur. Why would anybody want to know that? Because the soil particles will “hold” **either** mineral nutrients **or** hydrogen, so a higher % of hydrogen means your soil contains a lesser % of minerals. It does not and cannot tell you which minerals are present, and to what proportions. Adding fertilizers to your soil based only on a pH test is outright negligent, and a waste of money. A pH test is supposed to be used in combination with other soil tests, not in lieu of.

But isn’t a low or high pH bad for the plants? First of all, there are thousands of beautiful ornamental plants for every soil type, so it only makes sense to design your garden with plants that like to live there rather than trying to change your soil to suit the plants. Secondly it’s simply not possible to permanently change your native soil pH. At best the effect will be temporary, requiring constant additions of minerals, at worst your soil will

become depleted of “minor” nutrients through the chemical reactions that take place when we start treating the soil like a laboratory experiment.

Don’t worry, once again Mother Nature has this all figured out. Experience has shown that as the organic matter content of your soil increases, the pH moves towards neutral all by itself. A pH test then becomes a useful tool to monitor the success of your organic soil management practices. If at the beginning of your conversion to organic practices your pH was 5, and two years later it’s at 5.5 or 6, then you’re doing a good job.

A word of caution: soil pH varies throughout the garden, and throughout the year. When making comparative measurements be sure to take your sample from the same locations, growing the same vegetation, at the same time of year, with the same soil moisture content and even soil temperature. Otherwise you are comparing apples to oranges, even with such a simple test.

Summary

When our gardens are treated like ecosystems and managed in a way that supports natural processes there is little need for constant soil testing, or for constant additions of mineral fertilizers. Exceptions are highly disturbed soil, soil that has been mismanaged through indiscriminate applications of fertilizers and synthetic compounds, or instances where the native soil is truly deficient in a specific element. A soil mineral test will establish the “base line” and fertilizer program, and pH tests will help to monitor the progress. The most important “tests”, however, focus on the **3Ms: mulch, microbes and moisture.**



A BIG thank you to our supporting members!!!

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