



A9 Testing soil and improving fertility



This activity tells you how to start building soil fertility (B4.4). It has several simple tests as the first step in understanding soil as a living mass of organisms and chemistry that provide plants with water, fertility and anchorage. From these results, continue to develop an improvement plan for your particular soil.

Resources

- Clipboard/s, pen and paper
- Tools including hand fork, trowel, spade, and fork
- Soil pH testing kit, glass jars
- Materials for soil improvement, eg home-made compost (see below)



Adding organic matter for soil improvement

Activity

- 1 Follow some/all of the instructions overleaf for testing and improving your soil
 - a Soil texture and main characteristics
 - b Organic matter and living content
 - c Compaction and drainage (typical air and water content)
 - d Soil 'acidity' or 'alkalinity' (pH)
- 2 Review the test results and discuss implications with the group
- 3 Plan and implement a programme of soil improvement from the test results, eg adding organic matter, relieving compaction, improving drainage, adjusting soil pH, etc

Extended activities

- 1 Examine the role and origin of organic matter, eg compost, well rotted manure, leafmould.
- 2 Make a series of holes 5-15cm deep around the garden. Put samples on a white sheet and identify soil creatures, eg earthworms, beetles, centipedes, etc.

Health & Safety	Be careful when handling soil. Cover open wounds, wear gloves if necessary, and wash hands. Keep tetanus vaccinations up-to-date. Soil and organic matter can be dusty/slippy. <i>See also Health and Safety Guidelines (Section B3.3)</i>
Further information	B4.4 Building soil fertility B5.8 Digging B5.7 Making compost

Instructions testing soil and improving fertility

a. Soil texture and main characteristics

Soil types	Typical properties	Rub a small amount of moist soil between your fingers	Stir a handful of soil in a jar full of water. Leave to settle for two hours	Method and reason for improvements	
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Sand Mostly sand particles; water drains quickly (often too quickly, washing out fertility and causing drought). Light to dig; quick to warm up in spring

Feels gritty and doesn't stick together (though a sandy loam will stick together a little)

Will form a distinct gritty layer at the bottom and leave slightly dirty water above

Add organic matter to improve structure, water retention and fertility. Can also add 5-10cm layer of organic matter (eg compost – see below) on the soil surface to conserve moisture underneath ('mulching')

Clay Mostly clay particles; water drains slowly (can waterlog); often nutrient rich (but may be unavailable to plants); soil 'bakes' hard and cracks when dry; heavy to dig; slow to warm up in spring

Feels sticky and heavy. It will hold together in a ball without crumbling (though less so for clay loam). Soil may 'shine' when smoothed

Water will stay cloudy because there are so many smaller particles, with a thin layer of particles at the bottom

Add organic matter to improve structure, drainage, and make nutrients available. In heavier clay, dig in a bucket of 'horticultural grit' per square metre to improve drainage. Can also roughly dig over in winter, exposing clay lumps to frost to help break them down; dig again in spring

Silt Mixture of clay and sand characteristics. Usually moisture retentive with good fertility. Compacts easily

Feels silky or soapy and may show imprints when pressed; will hold together a little

Will leave a small layer of particles at the bottom and dirty water

Add organic matter to improve structure and help minimise likely compaction

a. Soil texture and main characteristics

Soil types	Typical properties	Rub a small amount of moist soil between your fingers	Stir a handful of soil in a jar full of water. Leave to settle for two hours	Method and reason for improvements
<i>Loam</i>	Balanced mixture of different sized soil particles; easy to work; fertile; water drains freely, yet soil retains moisture. 'Sandy loams' and 'clay loams' are common	Feels slightly gritty and dark in colour. It will hold together a little before crumbling	Will settle to fairly even layers of clay, silt and sand particles (with smaller clay particles at the top). Water left slightly cloudy	You're very lucky – this is good soil! Add organic matter to maintain soil structure and fertility in accordance with crop rotation (see Silver and Gold booklet)
<i>Chalk</i>	Generally shallow with lumps of chalk and flint stones; free draining; low-medium fertility; high pH (alkaline); texture can make digging difficult	Usually pale in colour and often stony with bits of chalk	Will make the water go pale grey colour with a gritty layer at the bottom (possibly with small white bits)	Add organic matter to improve structure, water retention, soil fertility, and build up the depth of top-soil (raised beds can help). Take out biggest stones if inconvenient for digging and crops; smaller stones cause no harm
<i>Peaty</i>	Very rich in organic matter; dark coloured, often very dry in summer and wet in winter; low-medium fertility; low pH (acid); easy to dig	Feels slightly spongy. Dark coloured and glistens when wet.	Will leave material floating in dirty water	Unusual to find naturally, but seen in raised beds filled just with compost. Mix at least 50:50 with top-soil (bought or from a spare pile in your garden). If peat is naturally occurring, add a bucket of 'horticultural grit' per square metre to improve drainage. See also A11.

b. Organic matter and living content

- Make a series of holes 5-15cm deep around the garden in different growing locations, including current and potential growing areas, eg vegetable beds.
- Compare the colour of the soil removed from the holes. Darker soil will have more organic matter where it was added by previous gardeners or built up naturally, eg by leaves from nearby trees. Lighter soil less so.
- There should be more living organisms in soil with high organic matter content. Earthworms are the best indicator as they are part of the decomposition cycle of organic matter.
- Poor growth of previous crops and surrounding plants can also suggest a soil low in organic matter.



Top tip

Visual Assessments

These assessments are simple indicators of soil health for growing food plants. If organic matter is low, add extra (see below). The soil life will increase naturally, including beneficial bacteria and fungi.

c. Compaction and drainage (typical air and water content)

- Dig a hole at least 60cm across, wide and deep. In most soils, you should see distinct layers of
 - dark coloured topsoil;
 - lighter 'sub-soil' with fewer organisms, and possibly;
 - a base layer of 'bed rock'.
- Bad compaction is suggested by
 - Solid lumps of soil when digging that don't break up easily;
 - there is an impermeable layer of severely compacted soil ('pan' between top and sub soil);
 - poor drainage.
- Poor drainage is suggested by
 - frequent puddling when water does not drain away quickly from soil surface, and
 - stagnant smell, possibly combined with 'blue-mottling' on the soil surface or lower down.



Top tip

Visual Assessments

These assessments are also intended as simple indicators of soil health. Reduce compaction and improve drainage by digging (A26). This adds air and lets water drain. Adding organic matter also helps by improving soil structure.

Main types of organic matter

Photo

Typical application

Home-made compost

Good NPK and trace elements

'Green waste' compost from local council has good K; N released slowly



Up to one wheelbarrowful per 5m² per year (3m² for green waste)

Animal manures

Varied; usually higher NPK than compost. Must be well rotted and from uncontaminated source (no weedkillers)



Up to one wheelbarrowful per 10m² per year (20m² for richer poultry manure)

Leafmould (rotted leaves)

Very low NPK. Excellent for improving soil structure. See Silver and Gold booklet



Apply layer up to 2-3cm deep. Can be added in autumn with no danger of leaching

Top tip



Benefits of adding organic matter

- Adds the three major nutrients plants need. These 'minerals' are nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K), known as NPK. A range of 'trace' minerals are added as well (eg zinc and iron).
- The residue of organic matter ('humus') clings to soil particles, eg improving drainage in clay soils and water retention in sandy soils, plus enlarging the surface area for available plant nutrients. Also adds air, reducing soil compaction.

When: apply organic matter when plants are actively growing, usually spring and summer is best. Applying in autumn can leave surplus nutrients to wash out the soil ('leach') unless plants are growing through winter.

How much: see table for typical application. Nutrients can also leach out before they're used by plants if too much organic matter is added. This wastes valuable nutrients and can potentially pollute water courses, damaging natural ecosystems. The same applies when applying 'concentrated fertilisers' such as liquid feeds.

Where: apply to different areas of the garden according to their needs using crop rotation (Silver and Gold booklet).

How to apply: Dig into the topsoil (A26) or spread over the soil surface, ie 'mulching' and 'no-dig' gardening (Silver and Gold booklet).

d. Soil 'acidity' or 'alkalinity' (pH)

pH meter

- Insert the probe into the soil at root level (about 10cm deep). Record readings at several different locations around the growing areas. Wipe clean between uses. Follow any other manufacturers' instructions.
- Meters are usually about £10.



pH liquid testing kit

- Take a small sample of soil from about 10cm deep and put it in the tube. Carefully open the capsule and pour the powder into the tube and add water. Shake well and allow to settle. Compare the colour of the water with the pH identification chart. Follow any other manufacturers' instructions.
- Repeat in several locations with new kit, or mix several samples together in a bucket and test this (representative) sample.
- Kits are usually about £2 each.

Try the Organic Gardening Catalogue

www.organiccatalog.com



Top tip

Soil Acidity

The soil 'acidity' or 'alkalinity', measured on a scale of 1-14 (very acid to very alkaline; neutral pH7). Most soils are pH4-8. The majority of vegetables prefer pH6.5-7 and most fruit pH6-6.5. Some diseases like 'potato scab' are more trouble on alkaline soil while 'clubroot' in the cabbage family spreads in soil that is too acid.

Adjust pH by adding dolomite limestone (less acid) or sulphur chips (more acid). Only minor shifts in pH are possible; easier to raise pH than lower. Only alter if necessary.