

Bluestem Breezes  
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## **Soil Testing – A Tool for Everyone**

I sat down to write this column thinking what in the world can we do while the ground is still soaked from the remains of our recent snow storms. Well, if you can physically get a soil probe to go in the ground, then it is a great time to soil test. Here is a column I wrote a few years back that I would like for us to revisit:

I was raised amidst a family who takes pride in feeding their family with the fruits of their labor. We savor a grilled steak from home raised cattle and a freshly made wilted lettuce salad with produce from our own garden.

What a way to begin a column on soil testing, right? Well, here is how I see it:

Let's walk through the production cycle – backwards.

Ingredients for wilted lettuce salad may include lettuce, radishes, and onions. These three products are grown out the back door in the family garden. Gardens will not produce vegetables of high quality and large quantities without appropriate levels of nutrients in the soil.

Our steaks, 100% of the time, originate from our home-raised beef. These cattle relied upon grain and grass for growth and survival. Fields, hay meadows, and pastures will not produce crops and grasses of high quality and large quantities without appropriate levels of nutrients in the soil.

Forget the broken record player comment, and the fact that moisture is also a BIG factor. I know this is only one piece to the puzzle; but remember, we're focusing on soil nutrient levels this week.

Soil testing is a simple, cheap way to determine the level of nutrients in your soil. Plus, it can help your pocketbook. Soil test results indicate whether you should or should not fertilize your soil. As well, they indicate how much of what you should apply.

For example, many rural gardeners believe in the power of manure as a fertilizer. That's great, until the nutrient levels are sky rocketing and your plants are no longer bearing fruit. For \$6-11 (depending on the test selected), you may save money by not adding potassium or phosphorus to your garden. The soil test may instruct you also to add sulfur to decrease pH or give recommendations on the amount of nitrogen to add.

Soil tests are unique to your soil.

If contemplating whether to grow corn or soybeans this year, the soil test can give you fertilizer recommendations for each crop. As a gardener, you may receive recommendations for each type of produce you intend to grow.

Fertilizer prices remain on the rise. Farmers and gardeners may save money in the long run by completing a soil test now. The results will help guide your decision making process, in regards to fertilizer, before you write a hefty check that may not be necessary.

While soil tests may not be necessary every year, it is recommended to conduct them about every 3 years on average. These results can be compared over the years to watch trends in your soils' nutrient levels, too.

Soil probes are the best, most accurate way to pull samples for your upcoming soil test. Probes may be checked out from the Extension Office any time. We can also give you simple instructions if this is your first test.

Regardless of whether you farm thousands of acres or plant a garden with a handful of plants, a soil test is a helpful resource tool. Plus, it is EASY to conduct! I encourage you to give it a try this month.

For additional information soil testing information, visit the Extension Office (215 Kansas, Courthouse, Alma; kamayer@ksu.edu; 765-3821). For Bluestem Breezes archives, check out [wabaunsee.ksu.edu](http://wabaunsee.ksu.edu).