

What soil testing can and can't do

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. I routinely answer questions about how to take a soil test and also routinely interpret soil tests for lawns and gardens that were brought in by homeowners. But what I often discover is that the problem isn't the soil, it's other environmental factors or what the homeowner really wants to test for, we can't do at the K-State soils lab.

Here's what a soil test will tell you. We can find out the soil pH, meaning is the soil acid, alkaline or neutral. We'll check the soil phosphorus and potassium levels. While the potassium is almost always quite high, it's just part of the basic test with pH and phosphorus. We can test for organic matter in the soil as higher levels of organic matter tend to improve soil structure and plant growth. Beyond that we can test for nitrogen and a whole host of elements needed for plant growth. We can even test for soil salinity or alkalinity if you happen to have a problem spot next to a street, driveway or sidewalk that has had a lot of deicers on it. We can not test for pesticides in the soil. I can direct you to commercial labs for that, but it can become pricey in a hurry. We can help you test soil around older homes for lead or other heavy metals, but fortunately we have not been much of a heavy industrial area so other than lead, we usually don't have problems. The other thing that a soil test won't show you is if poor plant growth is being caused by things like excessive shade, over or under watering, compacted soil and things like this. For those problems though, I can come out and take a look to see if we can discover what the problem may be. This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Moles

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. One of the problems with having a mild winter, is that moles stay way too active. Let me immediately add that in all honesty, when it comes to moles, tolerance, and dealing with the symptoms, is probably the best approach. Repellents, either chemical, herbal, sound or vibration do not work on a consistent level. If someone tried some repellent and it appeared to work, I'll contend it was only because the mole was ready to leave anyway! Poisons or toxicants that are available to the homeowner are also ineffective. Moles eat insects, not vegetation or grain. Moles swim through the soil and when their nose touches something that moves in reaction, the mole grabs it and eats it. Most grains and baits just sort of sit there and do nothing. Trapping is the one thing that will work, but it requires the moles to be very active on a regular basis, which they aren't right now. They may be active on a day when it's 60 degrees. But the next day when it's only 40, not so much. Attempts at trapping require dedication, time and resetting traps about every 24 hours to maximize effectiveness. The good news is that with only about three moles per acre, if you trap one in your urban size yard, you've probably taken care of the problem. Come and visit with me for more information on how to do an effective job of mole trapping. When they are active in the spring you can also try the water hose in the tunnel trick, or the sit quietly with a pitch fork and wait for the ground to start to move trick as well. But in the meantime, about all you can do is to keep stomping down the runs. This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.

Voles

This is Gardening with Chuck on 1420 KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte, Geary County, K-State Research and Extension Ag & Natural Resources Agent. So today we talk about voles. Voles, unlike the previously discussed moles are small mouse like rodents with sort of a humped back and a short tail. Unlike moles, voles are vegetation eaters and they live at and immediately below the ground. Voles are native to the Flint Hills and Kansas and seemingly up until a few years ago, they were a problem in wheat fields next to native prairie or occasionally in a residential yard next to a native prairie. Then a few years ago they started showing up in urban yards and it became personal when they showed up in my yard. Voles eat vegetation, often grass, that they cut off at ground level. They create runs at the ground surface that connect openings to underground tunnels which are their living quarters. They will often make these runs by eating off the grass directly on the run, but keeping the immediately adjacent grass to sort of provide a little overhead cover so hawks and carnivores can't see them so easily. Vole problems seem to ebb and flow and often merely ignoring them for a while until they disappear is the best approach. You can try to catch them with mouse traps placed perpendicular to the runs with the trigger across the run. Bait the trap with a peanut butter oatmeal mixture or small apple slices. Now is the best time of year to trap. You can also use poison grain type baits carefully making sure that the bait gets tossed down the tunnel entrances out of the reach of non-target wildlife. Make sure you check areas that were baited daily to make sure that the poison bait hasn't been pushed back up to the soil surface. This has been Gardening with Chuck on the Talk of JC, 1420

KJCK, I'm Chuck Otte.