

START WITH YOUR SOIL!

by Dana Olson

It is especially important when gardening in the Lake Tahoe basin that you start with thinking about your soil. Before planting, before even buying your plants, give your soil some attention. One of the most overlooked areas of the the garden is what plants depend on as their lifeline. The soil is one of the most important building blocks of a healthy garden and needs to be cared for even more than the plants that are rooted in it.

A great way to learn about your soil characteristics is by getting a soil test. This is a quick and inexpensive way to check the levels of important nutrients and pH in your soil. These tests should be done every few years and will help you amend your soil so that your plants are getting everything they need to thrive. A soil test will tell you what nutrients are abundant and what are lacking. This will help you add what is needed and take out the guesswork. It also helps you to not OVER fertilize your soil which causes the excess nutrients to leach into ground water or run off landscapes and pollute local waterways. The pH is a measurement of the relative acidity of the soil. Depending on what you wish to plant, you need to determine what pH is appropriate for the soil. Soils in Tahoe tend to be acidic, which is not suitable for many plants. Knowing the pH of your soil will help you adjust the soil to be most appropriate for the plants you are growing.

Not only will your soil test tell you about your soil, it will tell you how to fix it. Recommendations will be given on what to add to your soil and in what amounts. It also sometimes includes other management tips for your landscape.

You want to take your soil test in the fall or early spring and allow enough time to get the results back in time for planting (It usually takes around 3 weeks to get your results back, depending on the lab). Keep your test results so that you can refer back to them the next time you have a test done. This is a great way to see how well your amendment adjustments worked!

Taking a soil test is an easy, straight-forward process. First, find a lab that does soil testing and contact them or review their website for the appropriate testing requirements. This will usually consist of collecting approximately two cups of a soil sample in a ziplock bag. Collect separate samples from different areas of the yard. For example, don't mix soil from a turf area with soil from a raised bed. Also

consider the root depth of the area being sampled and collect only from the root zone. If there is an area that is having a particular issue, do a separate sample. Each sample will cost around \$30 to \$40, so be thorough without breaking the bank. A list of labs in the area can be found at the end of this article.

Where can you send your soil sample?

A&L Western Laboratories, Inc. www.al-labs-west.com

we need to include other labs... anyone know of any?