

Spruce up for Spring

As temperatures begin to rise and the days start to get longer, most of us start planning our spring activities to help combat cabin fever. As you start planning your spring activities including landscaping ideas and gardening, there are several things to keep in mind to help spring be "water smart."

Don't Guess... Soil Test!

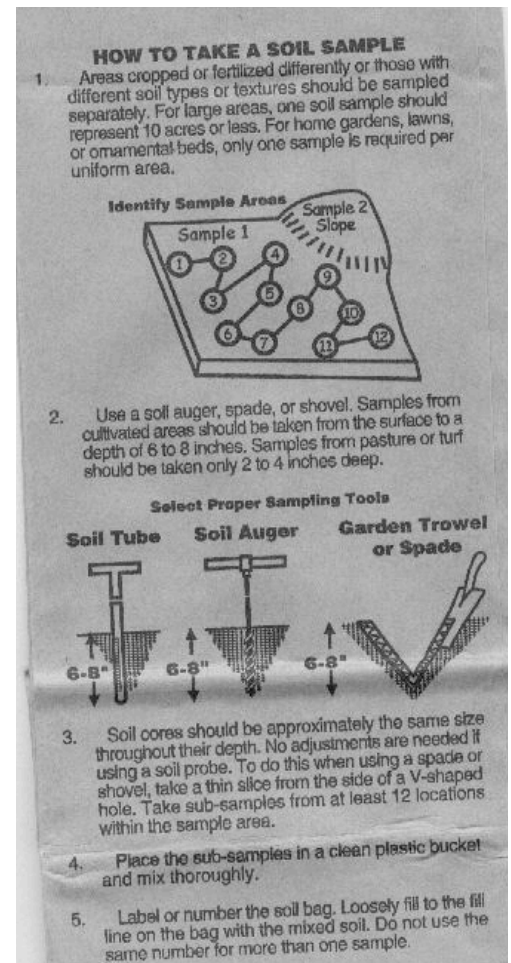
All landscaping projects, whether a major project, a vegetable garden, or planting just one plant, should start with a soil test. Soil tests tell you what you have before you begin. There are many nutrients that are essential for plant growth. A soil test will not only report the level of nutrients in your soil but will also tell you the pH value, the acidity or basicity, of your soil. The soil test results will also make recommendations on how much fertilizer or lime to add for optimum plant growth. Fertilizer and lime applications should be customized to your soil and plants' needs. This helps prevent problems with nutrient deficiencies due to under-fertilization and other problems associated with over-fertilization. It also helps protect against stormwater pollution resulting from excessive fertilizer applications. The Clemson Extension Service can provide a soil test for \$6.00, a great deal considering what a typical lab may charge and the cost of your landscaping investment!

In the upstate region, it is recommended that soil samples are taken in the very early spring. Soils in the upstate tend to be acidic, so the addition of lime is almost always necessary. Lime takes time to break down and work its way into the soil, so it is necessary to plan in advance.

Landscape Smart

If you do your homework before planting, you can reduce the amount of work that your yard will require and reduce your yard's impact on the environment. When planning a landscape project, choose plants that are suited to the conditions in your yard and climate. This will help reduce the amount of fertilizer and lime that you will have to apply to your yard. Also, if you choose appropriate plants, you may also reduce the need for watering after the plant is established – saving water, money and time. Native plants can often survive on rainfall alone and require less attention.

Other ideas for a water smart landscape include using as much low-maintenance ground covers, shrubs, mulch or porous surface where possible. Compared to grass, these require less yard chemicals and less maintenance. Do not replace porous surfaces with nonporous surfaces which would increase the amount of runoff from your yard and leave less area for water to infiltrate back into the soil. You can



also reduce yard waste by choosing plants that will not require frequent pruning when they reach maturity.

Last year's drought may seem far away given the amount of rainfall received recently in the upstate. However, measures to reduce water use, increase infiltration of rain water back to the soil and manage your yard's runoff are still essential steps for every homeowner to consider for the protection of the natural resources that are of such value to life in the upstate. More information on plant options, mulch, compost, rain barrels and water smart landscapes can be found in the *Carolina Yardstick Workbook* and other resources online at www.clemson.edu/carolinaclear (check the "What You Can Do" section and toolbox).

Maintain Yard Equipment

Just like your car, your lawn mower or tractor needs to be maintained on an annual basis. Seasonal maintenance consists largely of cleaning and lubricating your mower. This is because dirt on the inside of the mower can cause damage, while dirt on the outside traps heat, both of which can shorten the operating life of your mower. Yearly maintenance includes cleaning the underside of the deck to make sure that it is not clogged, sharpening your blade, installing a new spark plug to ease the starting process and changing the oil filter and cleaning the fuel tank. You should also check for leaks in the fuel system and in the fuel lines and replace anything that is deteriorating. This will help your lawn mower run more efficient, keep fuel out of the environment and add to the life of your lawn mower.

Marguerite Porter, Clemson Cooperative Extension Service of Pickens County