
Soil Sampling

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Environmental concerns have brought nutrient management in agriculture under increased scrutiny. A goal of sound nutrient management is to maximize the proportion of applied nutrients that is used by the crop (nutrient use efficiency). Soil sampling is a best management practice (BMP) for fertilizer management that will help improve nutrient use efficiency and protect the environment.

Soil sampling is also one of the most important steps in a sound crop fertilization program. Poor soil sampling procedures account for more than 90 percent of all errors in fertilizer recommendations based on soil tests. Soil test results are only as good as the soil sample. Once you take a good sample, you must also handle it properly for it to remain a good sample.

A good soil testing program can be divided into four operations: (1) taking the sample, (2) analyzing the sample, (3) interpreting the sample analyses, and (4) making the fertilizer recommendations. This publication focuses on the first step, collecting the soil sample.

Once you take a sample, you must send it to a laboratory for analysis. Then the Extension agricultural educator or fertilizer fieldman in your county can interpret the analysis and make specific fertilizer recommendations. Fertilizer guides from the University of Idaho Cooperative Extension System are also available to help you select the correct fertilizer application rate.

The soil sampling guidelines in this publication meet sampling standards suggested by federal, state, and local nutrient management programs in Idaho.

What is a soil test?

A soil test is a chemical evaluation of the nutrient-supplying capability of a soil at the time of sampling. Not all soil-testing methods are alike nor are all fertilizer recommendations based on those soil tests equally reliable.

Reliable fertilizer recommendations are developed through research by calibrating laboratory soil test values and correlating them with crop responses to fertilizer rates. These soil test correlation trials must be conducted for several years on a particular crop growing on a specific soil type. If soil test calibration is incomplete, fertilizer recommendations based on soil-test results still can only be best guesses.

A soil test does not measure the total amount of a specific nutrient in the soil. There is usually little relationship between the total amount of a nutrient in the soil and the amount of a nutrient that plants can obtain.

A soil test also does not measure the amount of plant-available nutrients in the soil because not all the nutrients in the soil are in a form readily usable by plants. Through research, however, a relationship can usually be established between soil test nutrient levels and the total amount of a nutrient in the soil.

What does a soil test measure?

Present soil-testing methods measure a certain portion of the total nutrient content of the soil. During testing, this portion is removed from the soil by an extracting solution that is mixed with the soil for a given length of time. The solution containing the extracted portion of the nutrient is separated from the soil by filtration, and then the solution is analyzed.

A low soil-test value for a particular nutrient means the crop will be unable to obtain enough of that nutrient from the soil to produce the highest yield under average soil and climatic conditions. A nutrient deficiency should be corrected by adding the nutrient as a fertilizer. The amount of nutrient that needs to be added for a given soil-test value is calculated based on results from the correlation research test plots.

Sampling timing

Because nutrient concentrations in the soil vary with the season, you should take soil samples as close as possible to planting or to the time of crop need for the nutrient. Ideally, take the soil samples 2 to 4 weeks before planting or fertilizing the crop. It usually requires 1 to 3 weeks to take a soil sample, get the sample to the testing laboratory, and obtain results.

Sampling very wet, very dry, or frozen soils will not affect soil test results

though collecting soil samples under these conditions is difficult. Do not sample snow-covered fields. The snow makes it difficult to recognize and avoid unusual areas in the field, so you may not get a representative sample.

Sampling frequency

For best soil fertility management, especially for the mobile nutrients, sample each year and fertilize for the potential yield of the intended crop. Having an analysis performed for every nutrient each year is not necessary. Whether you need an analysis of a nutrient depends on such things as its mobility in the soil and the nutrient requirements of the crop.

Take soil samples at least once during each crop rotation cycle. Maintain a

record of soil test results on each field to evaluate long-term trends in nutrient levels.

Sampling procedure

One of the most important steps in a soil testing program is to collect a soil sample that represents the area to be fertilized. If the soil sample is not representative, the test results and recommendations can be misleading.

The correct steps in soil sampling are illustrated in figure 1. Before sampling, obtain necessary information, materials, and equipment from the Extension agricultural educator or fertilizer fieldman in your county.

Use proper soil sampling tools. A soil auger or probe is most convenient, but

you can use a shovel or spade for shallow samples. You will need a plastic bucket or other container for each sample to help you collect and mix a composite sample.

Be sure that all equipment is clean, and especially be sure it is free of fertilizer. Even a small amount of fertilizer dust can result in a highly erroneous analysis. Do not use a galvanized bucket when analyzing for zinc (Zn) or a rusty shovel or bucket when analyzing for iron (Fe). If the sample will be analyzed for Fe or manganese (Mn), do not dry the soil sample before shipping.

When sampling, avoid unusual areas such as eroded sections, dead furrows, and fence lines. If the field to be sampled covers a large area with

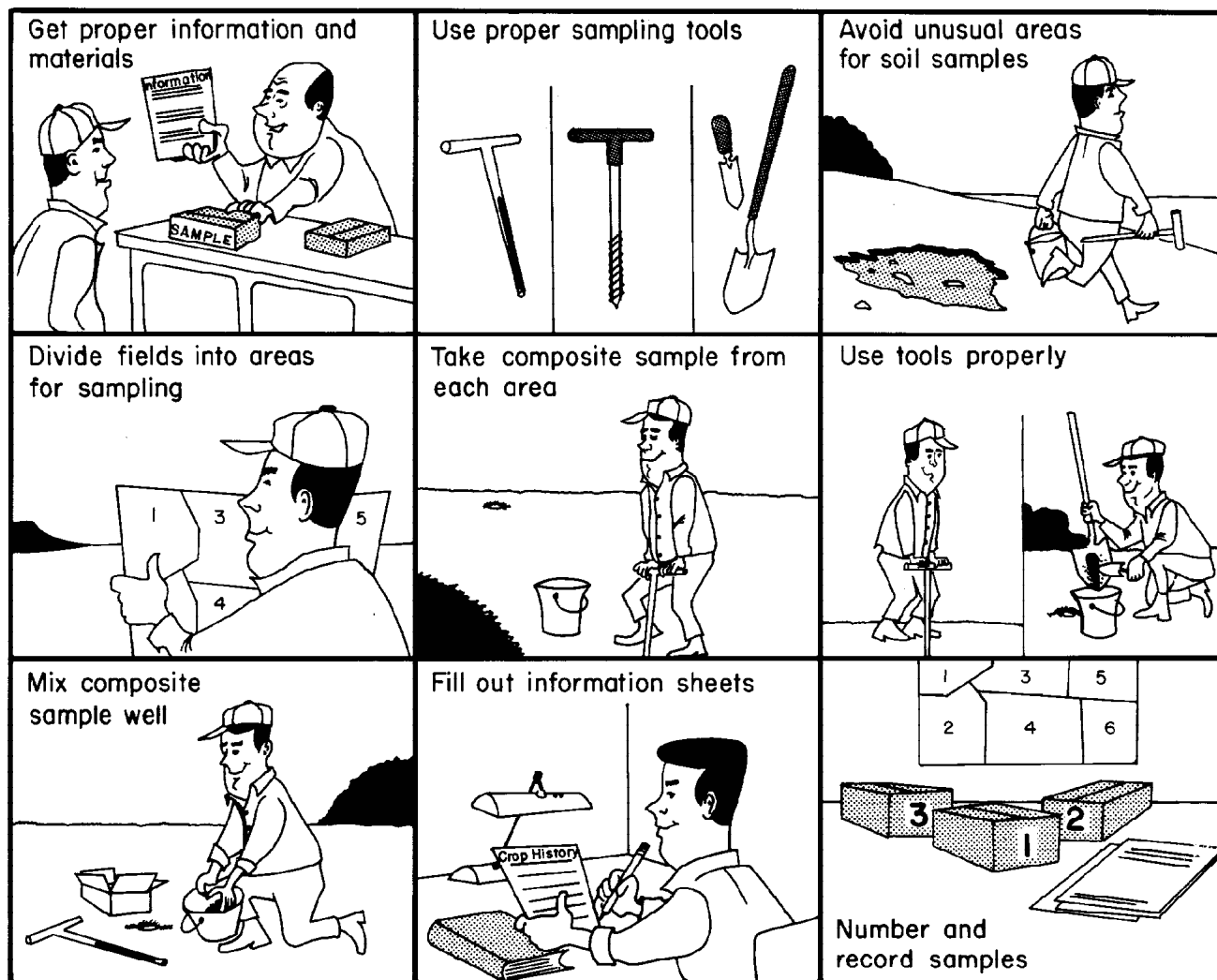


Fig. 1. Follow these steps to obtain a good sample for testing (redrawn courtesy of the National Fertilizer Institute).

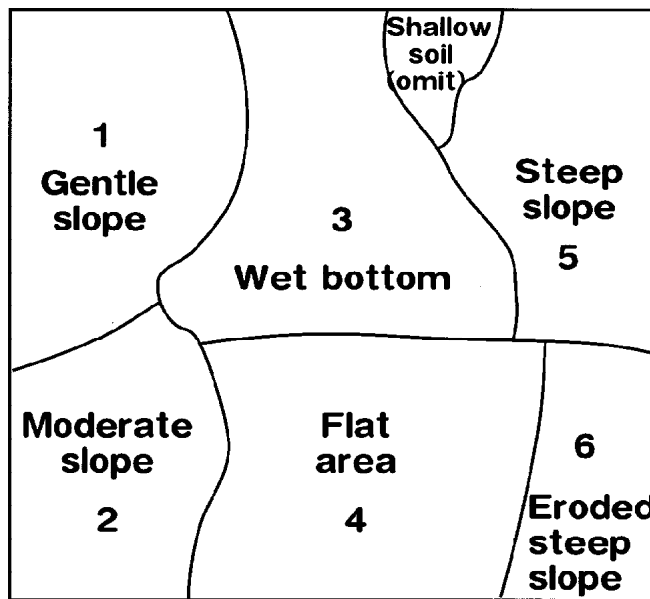


Fig. 2. A field with areas identified as sampling units.

varied topography, subdivide it into relatively uniform sampling units (fig. 2). Sampling subdivision units that are too small to fertilize separately may be of interest, but impractical if you do not treat the small units differently from the rest of the field. Omit these areas from the sampling.

Within each sampling unit take soil samples from several different locations and mix these subsamples into one composite sample. The number of subsamples needed to obtain a representative composite sample depends on the uniformity and size of the sampling unit (table 1). Although the numbers of subsamples in table 1 give the best results, they may be unrealistic if you plan to take a great number of samples. An absolute minimum of 10 subsamples from each sampling unit is necessary to obtain an

acceptable sample. The more subsamples you take, the better the representation of the area sampled.

Take all subsamples randomly from the sampling unit, but be sure to distribute subsample sites throughout the sampling unit. Meander or zig-zag throughout each sampling unit to sample the area. Special considerations are necessary in eroded areas, furrow irrigation, under no-till, and where fertilizer is banded (see "Special Sampling").

The total amount of soil you collect from the sampling unit may be more

Table 2. Effective rooting depth for some common Idaho crops.

Crop	Depth (feet)
Cereals (wheat, barley, oats)	5 to 6
Corn	5 to 6
Alfalfa, rapeseed	4 to 5
Hops, grapes, tree fruits	4 to 5
Sugarbeets	2 to 3
Peas, beans, lentils, onions, potatoes, mint	2
Vegetable seed	1 to 1½

than you need for analyses. Mix the individual subsamples together thoroughly and take the soil sample from the composite mixture. The composite sample should be at least 1 pint—about 1 pound—in size.

Sampling depth

Depth of sampling is critical because tillage and nutrient mobility in the soil can greatly influence nutrient levels in different soil zones (fig. 3). Sampling depth depends on the crop, cultural practices, tillage depth, and the nutrients to be analyzed.

Because the greatest abundance of plant roots, greatest biological activity,

Table 1. Number of subsamples recommended for a representative composite sample based on field size.

Field size (acres)	Number of subsamples
fewer than 5	15
5 to 10	18
10 to 25	20
25 to 50	25
more than 50	30

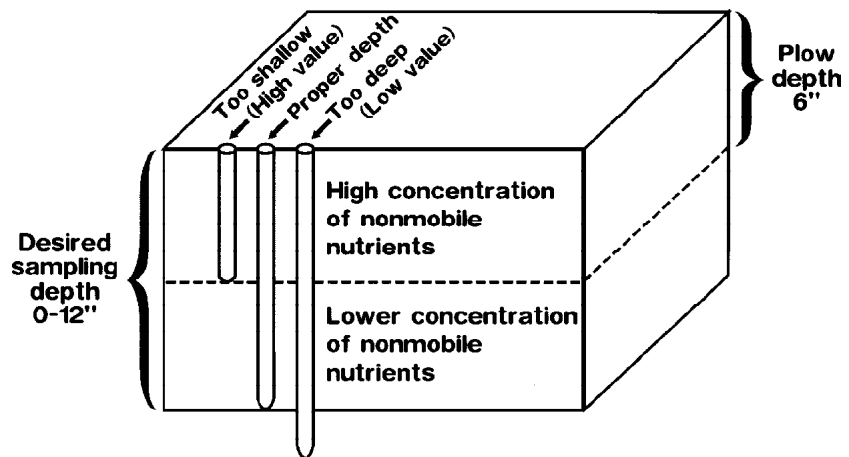


Fig. 3. Too deep or shallow a sampling depth can produce inaccurate soil test results. The plow layer is usually higher in nonmobile nutrients than the soil layers below it.

and highest nutrient levels occur in the surface layers, the upper 12 inches of soil are used for most analyses. The analyses run on the surface sample include soil reaction (pH), phosphorus (P), potassium (K), organic matter, sulfur (S), boron (B), zinc (Zn), and other micronutrients.

Sampling depth is especially critical for nonmobile nutrients such as P and K. The recommended sampling depth for nonmobile nutrients is 12 inches (fig. 3).

The tillage zone, typically 6 to 8 inches deep, usually contains a relatively uniform, high concentration of nonmobile nutrients. Below the tillage zone the concentration is usually lower. Therefore, a sample from the tillage zone will usually have a higher content of nonmobile

nutrients than a sample from the desired 0- to 12-inch sample depth. This can lead to erroneous results.

Depth sampling

When sampling for mobile nutrients such as nitrogen (N), boron (B), and sulfur (S), take samples by 1-foot increments to the effective rooting depth of the crop (fig. 4). This can be a depth of 5 to 6 feet (table 2) unless the soil has a root-limiting layer such as bedrock or hardpan. For each foot depth, take 10 or more subsamples at random from the sampling unit.

If you plan to sample less than a year after banding or injecting fertilizer or if you have any question about fertilizer placement, use the sampling technique described under "Areas

Where Fertilizer Has Been Banded." Irrigation or precipitation should disperse mobile nutrients over a period of a year.

Sample handling

Soil samples need special handling to ensure accurate results and minimize changes in nutrient levels because of biological activity. Keep moist soil

samples cool at all times during and after sampling. Samples can be frozen or refrigerated for extended periods of time without adverse effects.

If the samples cannot be refrigerated or frozen soon after collection, air dry them or take them directly to the soil testing laboratory. Air dry by spreading the sample in a thin layer on a plastic sheet. Break up all clods or lumps, and spread the soil in a layer about 1/4 inch deep. Dry at room temperature. If a circulating fan is available, position it to move the air over the sample for rapid drying.

Caution: Do not dry where agricultural chemical or fertilizer fumes or dust will come in contact with the samples. Do not use artificial heat in drying. Ask the Extension agricultural educator or fertilizer fieldman in your county for more details concerning special handling of soil samples.

When the soil samples are dry, mix the soil thoroughly, crushing any coarse lumps. Take from the sample about 1 pint (roughly 1 pound) of well-mixed soil and place it in a soil sample bag or other container. Soil sample bags and soil test report forms are available from the Cooperative Extension System office in your county or from a fertilizer fieldman.

Label the bag carefully with your name, the sample number, sample depth, and field number. The field number should correspond with a field or farm map showing the areas

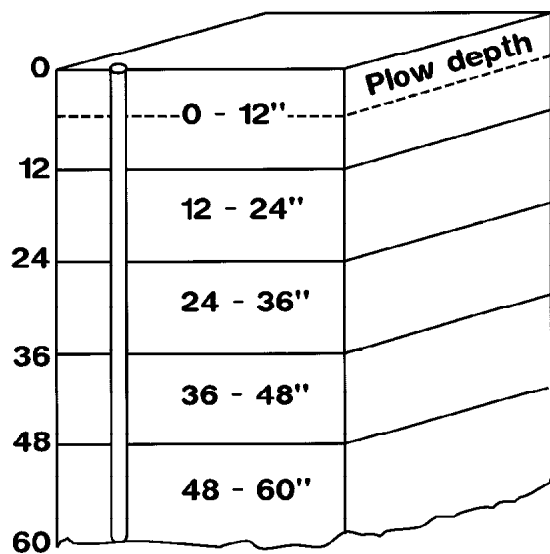


Fig. 4. Depth sampling (successive samples by 12-inch increments) for mobile nutrients (especially N) should be continued to rooting depth, which may be 5 to 6 feet for some crops.

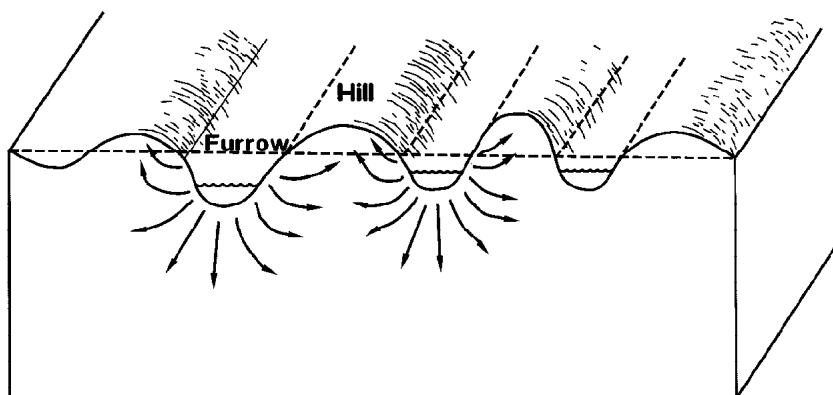


Fig. 5. Movement of mobile nutrients in furrow-irrigated fields.

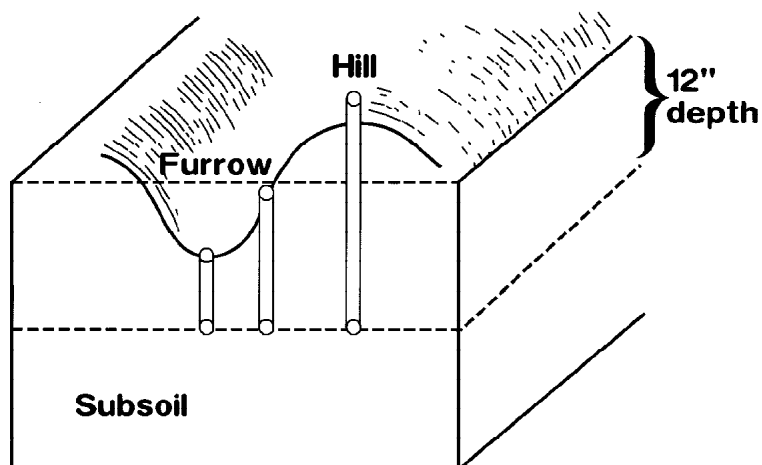


Fig. 6. Special sampling techniques are required when soil sampling furrow-irrigated fields. Take a sample from the hilltop, the furrow bottom, and at the midpoint between the hilltop and furrow bottom. The 12-inch sampling depth is based on the midpoint sampling location.

sampled. This will help you keep an accurate record of soil test reports. Provide information on crop to be grown, yield potential, recent history of crops grown, yields, fertilizer applied, and other information.

Sample analysis

Analyze regularly only for those nutrients that have been shown to be yield limiting in your area or for the crop to be grown. In general, all soils should be analyzed for N, P, K, and S. For determination of potential need for micronutrients, refer to PNW 276, *Current Nutrient Status of Soils in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington*. Occasional analyses for micronutrient concentrations may be advisable.

Special sampling

Special sampling problems occur in fields that have been leveled for irrigation, fields that have lost all or most topsoil as a result of erosion, fields that are surface (furrow)

irrigated, fields that have had a fertilizer band applied, and fields that are not thoroughly tilled.

Land-leveled and eroded areas

Areas that have been eroded or artificially leveled for irrigation usually have little or no original topsoil. The soil surface may be exposed subsoil material. These areas should be sampled separately if they are large enough to be managed differently from where topsoil has not been removed. Subsoil material is usually low in organic matter and can be high in clay, calcium carbonate (lime), or both.

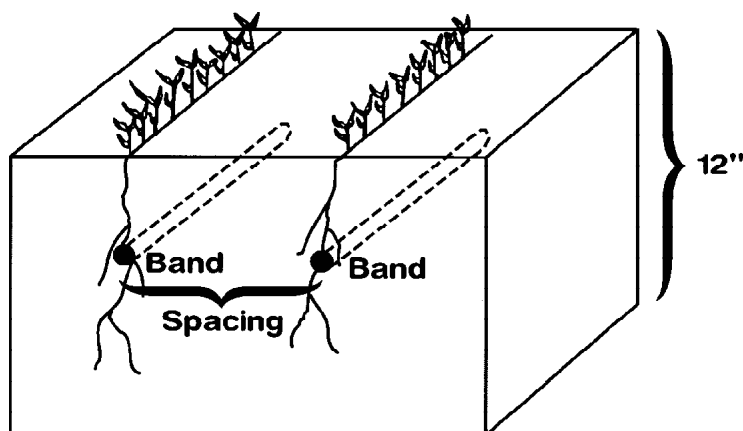


Fig. 7. Diagram of fertilizer location in soil where fertilizer has been banded.

For a representative soil sample, sample furrow-irrigated fields before the furrowing operation. If furrowing has already been completed, follow the special sampling procedures described here.

The movement of water and dissolved plant nutrients can create unique nutrient distribution patterns in the hills between the furrows (fig. 5). To obtain a representative sample, you need to be aware of furrow direction, spacing, and location, and to take closely spaced soil samples perpendicular to the furrow (fig. 6).

Approximately 20 sites (with at least three samples per site) are needed for a representative composite soil sample. At each sampling site, take a sample from the hilltop, from the midpoint between the hilltop and furrow, and from the furrow bottom. The sampling depth at the midpoint between the hilltop and furrow bottom should be 12 inches. The bottom point of this sample should be the same as for the furrow and hilltop samples. Thus, the furrow sampling depth will be less than 12 inches, while the hilltop sampling depth will be more than 12 inches (fig. 6).

Mix the hilltop, midpoint, and furrow samples to make a composite sample for each site. Mix the site samples for a representative composite field soil

sample to be analyzed for nonmobile nutrients (P, K, and micronutrients). Deeper profile sampling (depth sampling) is recommended for mobile nutrients (N and S).

Areas where fertilizer has been banded

Banding of fertilizers is becoming a more common practice (fig. 7). In fields where fertilizers have been banded and tillage has occurred before soil sampling, regular sampling procedures can be followed. However, if tillage has not adequately mixed the soil, special soil sampling is required. If a field has had a banded fertilizer application the previous growing season and has not been plowed, an ideal sample would be a continuous slice 1 to 2 inches thick and 12 inches deep extending from the center of one band to the center of the next band.

Little research has been conducted to determine the best method of sampling banded fields. Currently three different approaches are used widely. Each method produces a satisfactory representative sample, but the effort required to obtain these samples differs considerably.

Systematic sampling method . If you know the direction, depth, and spacing of the fertilizer band, you can obtain a representative soil sample with this sampling procedure. Take 5 to 10 soil samples perpendicular to the band row beginning in the edge of a fertilizer band and ending at the edge of an adjacent band (fig. 8). Follow this procedure on at least 20 sampling sites in each field or portion of a field being sampled. Mix and composite the soils collected from each site to obtain a representative soil sample.

Controlled sampling method. You also should know the direction, depth, and spacing of the fertilizer bands to obtain a representative soil sample with this method. Take 20 to 30 soil cores from locations scattered throughout the field or portion of the field. Avoid sampling directly in a fertilizer band.

The composite sample should adequately represent the area being sampled. This method may result in slightly lower soil test values of nonmobile nutrients (P, K, and micronutrients) than the systematic and random sampling methods.

Random sampling method . Use this sampling method when the location of the previous season's fertilizer bands is not known. Take 40 to 60 random soil cores to form a composite sample of the area being sampled.

Reduced tillage or no-till fields

You may need special approaches to soil sampling with reduced tillage or no-till fields because the soil has been disturbed so little that fertilizer, whether broadcast on the surface or banded below the surface, is not mixed into the soil. You need to know the history of fertilization, tillage, and other management practices to determine how to obtain a representative sample.

If nonmobile nutrients (P, K, and micronutrients other than B) have been surface broadcast and little or no tillage has been used since their application, remove the surface 1 inch of soil before sampling. Nutrients in the top inch of soil will probably not be available to the growing crop.

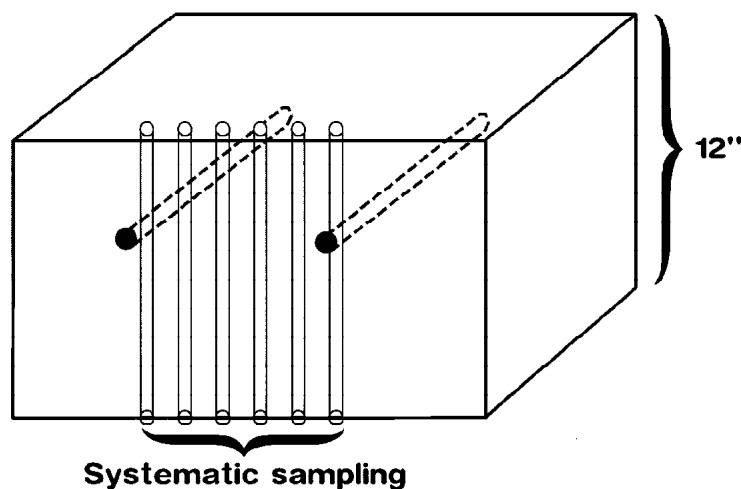


Fig. 8. Systematic soil sampling in a field where fertilizer has been banded (sampling method 1).

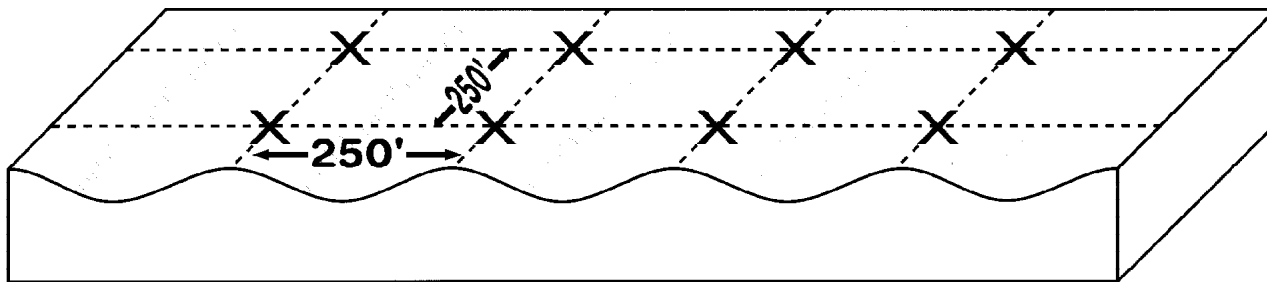


Fig. 9. Grid soil sampling pattern where samples are collected every 250 feet. Note that a complete soil sample is collected at each spot marked with an X.

If fertilizer has been banded with the no-till system, consider methods suggested in “Areas Where Fertilizer Has Been Banded.” If a field has been under a continuous no-till system for a long time, determine the pH of the surface foot at 3-inch intervals (0 to 3, 3 to 6, 6 to 9, 9 to 12 inches) every 3 to 5 years. Soil pH will affect the availability of fertilizer nutrients as well as the activity of commonly used herbicides, insecticides, and fungicides.

Grid sampling in nonuniform fields

Many fields are not uniform and vary both horizontally and vertically across landscapes. Traditional soil sampling procedures average nutrient levels in soil subsamples to determine average nutrient levels in the field. The nutrient values obtained are good, but the manager must realize that many of the values in the field are either less than or greater than the values determined. When fields are broken into grids with shorter distances between the sampling points a more precise soil map can be developed to determine nutrient needs.

The technology is now available to combine grid sampling with variable

rate fertilizer application to handle spatial variability within a field. These application techniques make fertilizer nutrient application more precise, resulting in greater nutrient use efficiency and reducing pollution potential.

Irrigated fields including individual pivots should be set up in a 200- to 300-foot grid for potato, sugarbeets, corn, and other potentially high-N-use crops (fig. 9). A wider grid of 400 feet may be used for small grains, beans, and other crops where N management is less intensive or under dryland conditions.

Soil nutrient needs for each segment of the grid are entered into a computer-driven system mounted on specialized commercial fertilizer application equipment. Variable rates of nutrients are then applied based on individual soil samples over the entire field.

A similar system designed for fertilizer applications through pivot sprinklers is being developed by the University of Idaho. This system has the potential to apply variable rates of nutrients and water specifically related to changes across individual fields.

The Soil Conservation Service has a digitized soil survey information system (SSIS), which when combined with the results of grid sampling provides specific information and recommendations for soils and soil types within a field. The SSIS can locate pockets of sandy or coarse-textured soils where leaching is a major concern or areas of finer-textured soils where pockets of residual N may occur. The SSIS also indicates where erosion or surface runoff may be high and where areas should be targeted for federal programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program.

Another computer-mapping technique, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), can be combined with the results of grid sampling to provide growers and land managers with information for land-use planning.

Additional information on proper soil sampling procedures can be obtained from the Extension agricultural educator or fertilizer fieldman in your county.

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