

Gardeners know all the best dirt. A number of years ago, my next-door neighbor, Edith Martin, who has since passed away, gave me a little pillow with that very saying printed on it.



She knew I was an avid gardener and one year for Christmas, she gave it to me as a gift. I proudly continue to display that little pillow in my office— in part as a memorial to her, but also as an important reminder to me of not only knowing the best dirt but having the best dirt when it comes to gardening. Occasionally, when people

stop by my office and notice that prophetic pillow, they often chuckle. Although the saying is meant to be a play on words, in reality, it should be a true statement. Gardeners should know the best dirt, or perhaps more accurately stated, gardeners should know the best soil.

Most do-it-yourself gardening books begin with information about good soil. Their number one message is that no other gardening tasks should begin until good soil is established.



Good soil does occur naturally, but rarely, in most urban settings. What took hundreds of thousands of years to create can be quickly altered overnight. During new construction natural, healthy soils are excavated and moved about, usually resulting in major changes to the soil's profile. Once construction is completed, contractors grade and level the area with whatever soil remains. Unfortunately, all

too often, that soil is inferior. Repeatedly, homeowners call me seeking help on how to improve their landscape's soil.

Quality soil is the basic foundation for a successful landscape. Once trees, grass, shrubs and other plants are planted, improving the quality of the soil becomes more difficult. If at all possible, inferior soils should be amended and improved before any planting begins.

The question may now be, "How does one accurately know if one's soil is inferior?" The answer— a soil test.

A soil test is nothing more than a measure of the soil's health. Autumn is a great time to have soil tested. Following the growing season, soil nutrients are usually at their lowest levels. Furthermore, in the fall, most soil test laboratories are less busy. Although one can purchase a do-it-yourself soil test kit, the most accurate tests are conducted by professional soil laboratories. Such a test will check for pH and major nutrients including nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. Other tests can reveal micronutrients, organic matter content and cation exchange capacity (the ability of soil particles to hold and release specific nutrients). Based on the outcome of the soil test, the lab can make recommendations for specific adjustments regarding one's soil fertility.

Although usually not expensive, to conduct a soil test, a sample needs to be collected. The soil sample should be a representative mix. When taking the sample, dig a number of small holes with a trowel and place the soil in a bucket. When finished, mix the soil and take a sample to the laboratory for testing. Experts agree that having the soil tested every three or four years makes good sense.

For more information regarding a soil test, one might wish to check with Ward Laboratories, Inc., located in Kearney, Nebraska, on East Highway 30. Their telephone number is 308-234-2418.

While it is still autumn and before the ground freezes, consider having your soil tested. By so doing, you may be one of those gardeners who can honestly boast about knowing all the best dirt.