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Mark Keaton's Extension News: It's time to test soil

Now is a good time to have your soil tested and to add lime, if needed. Ground limestone is the most common material used, is slow-acting and should be applied 5-6 months before planting.

Soils are referred to as acid or alkaline depending on the pH. A neutral soil has a pH of 7. Soils below 7 are acid and soils above 7 are alkaline. Most garden and landscape plants grow best in slightly acid soil with a pH range from 5.5 to 6.8.

Most fertilizers and the natural weathering process tend to make soils gradually more acid. Therefore, it is necessary to have the soil checked every few years to make sure the pH is in the desirable range. Liming should not be done without a soil analysis, because it is just as bad to be too high as too low. Lime serves several purposes in the soil: it increases the availability of fertilizer and other nutrients, provides calcium, aids in the release of nitrogen from organic sources, and helps stabilize soil structure. It also decreases the uptake of elements that may be toxic in high concentrations.

There are several forms of lime available. Agricultural lime (ground limestone) is the most common and generally is the most economical and safest to use. Burned or quick lime is made by roasting agriculture lime to change it to calcium oxide.

It has about two times the neutralizing power of ground limestone, costs more, doesn't last as long and is more hazardous to use.

When burned lime is treated with water, it is slaked or hydrated lime. It also has greater neutralizing power, but is expensive and difficult to handle. Remember that ground limestone or agricultural lime is the recommended product for lawns and gardens and don't apply lime without testing your soil to see if it's needed.

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