Soil test could solve ‘lazy turf’ problem

A proper soil analysis will reveal if a nutrient deficiency is the cause of turf lethargy.

- Has your turf lost its “zing”? Does it have that lackluster, “not-as-bright-as-it-USED-TO-BE” shade of green?

If you know it’s not caused by disease, drought or insect damage, your turf’s lethargic look could be caused by a nutrient deficiency in the soil, a problem that’s easily remedied.

But first, you need a soil nutrient analysis, which starts by taking 15 to 20 core samples from the area in question.

“If you don’t have a truly representative sample, one that represents the fertility level of the turf, the analysis will not be of sample exchanges.

Heckman says not much has changed in the way soils are tested, but there have been interesting finding over the last few years. One of the most important is the high phosphorus content found in approximately 75 percent of all samples obtained from landscapers and homeowners in New Jersey and other states.

“This is due to repeated fertilizer applications,” says Heckman. “Phosphorus is very strongly absorbed to soil particles; it doesn’t leach. We’d like to see greater awareness, and a reduction in use of phosphorus fertilizers in soils that already test very high in that nutrient.”

According to Heckman, the excess phosphorus could cause reduced availability of other nutrients.

Private labs also do creditable work. The Harris company, a leader in agricul-
tors who are providing the service to customers, primarily golf course superinten-
dents.

Soil content varies greatly from one region to another, so you’ll likely find differ-
ing results from sample taken in differ-
ent parts of the country.

“In the eastern U.S., the soil will tend to be on the acid side,” explains Frack, “so liming applications may be required. In the West, you’re dealing with alkaline soils and higher sodium or salt content, where applications of gypsum or elemental sul-
phur may need to be made to lower a pH.”

Golf courses represent unique chal-

lenges in any locale. “So much of (the golf course) is a man-made, particularly golf greens,” says Frack. “They’re building specifically to grow grass, so you don’t necessarily have a ‘natural’ soil medium.”

Thanks to USGA standards, many golf courses provide a better growing environ-
ment than what existed before, but man-
gers still must fertilize accordingly and work the greens, due to sand content.

“They may drain very well,” says Frack, “but be a little low on the nutrient side.”

If you send the same sample to two dif-
ferent labs, and get two different readings, be sure both data are being reported in the same measurements, either parts per mil-

lion or pounds per acre.

Some even report in parts per two million,” says Frack. “All the numbers could be exactly right, but if people aren’t familiar with the methods or reporting units of the labs, you may actually think you’ve got different results.

A soil analysis is very inexpensive, espe-

cially when you consider the headaches it might solve for you.

Frack says Harris will conduct a basic N/P/K analysis for under $20. A more com-
plete analysis, with micronutrient content and sand/silt/clay percentage breakdown costs between $30 and $40.

—Terry McIver