

Bell County Master Gardener
Tip of the Week
By Mary Lew Quesinberry
"Soil Analysis"

Q. I have always grown great tomatoes, but this year is a total flop. Someone commented that I had "dead" soil. Who, where, and how do I go about getting a soil analysis? What is "dead" soil?

A. Many things determine crop failure; plant quality, planting technique, moisture, soil fertility, lack of crop rotation, soil diseases, amount of sunshine, insects and weeds. Trying to blindly solve crop failures is frustrating and will waste time, money and energy. Our first instinct is to apply a chemical fertilizer, but please begin with a soil analysis instead. A soil analysis can be done at any time of year. A soil analysis bag and information for collecting a soil sample is available at the Texas AgriLife Extension office located in Belton at 1605 North Main. A basic soil analysis starts at \$10. Follow the included instructions; the soil analysis will only be as good as the sample you provide. The Soil, Water and Forage Testing Laboratory located at the Texas A&M University in College Station will analyze your sample and send you the results. You will then have knowledge of your soil's content and fertility and an explanation on correcting your soil's deficiencies. It is helpful to view "How to Take a Soil Sample" by visiting "<http://aggieturf.tamu.edu>" and then click on "diagnostics."

After you have your soil analysis, work to enrich your soil by incorporating decomposing organic material into your planting beds. This will create humus and a soil alive with microorganisms and creatures. Healthy soil has microbes, fungi, bacteria and earthworms that depend on the addition of decomposing material to stay vibrant. Healthy living soil will result in strong, productive plants that will be naturally resistant to disease. Be careful using chemical soil enhancements. Many of them have high levels of mineral salts that will harm soil organisms and result in a "dead" soil.

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmqa@gmail.com

In the photo: There is no equal to the taste of a homegrown vegetable. To have a successful garden start with a soil analysis, and then with the analysis' results, work to incorporate decomposing organic material into your planting bed to have a healthy, vibrant soil alive with microorganisms and earthworms.

