



TESTING – IT’S NOT JUST FOR STUDENTS

Soil tests provide essential insights for improving food plot results

MY SON, AND other high school seniors across the country, are mailing off test results to their prospective homes-away-from-home for the next four years. Universities use those tests to evaluate potential students as well as identify areas where students need improvement.

Soil tests do the same thing for your food plots, and are optimally done in the fall so you have time to make adjustments if necessary.

Plant growth and vigor depend on soil pH (acidity or alkalinity) and available nutrients (Nitrogen or N, Phosphorus or P, Potassium or K). pH also affects plants' ability to uptake nutrients and impacts the effectiveness of many herbicides.

It's important to note that if your soil pH is in need of adjustment, the process can take several months. That's why fall application of any treatment is optimal.

Quality food plots are an investment of your time, treasure and talents (in the

form of manual labor), so don't throw those away because of test anxiety. A soil test is an easy and essential way to gather important information on what your soil needs.

Your local Extension Service office is a great resource for inexpensive send-away soil tests. But DIY kits can be found online and at many garden centers. Send-away tests will give you the most accurate and informative results, along with fertilizer and lime recommendations. DIY kits provide more self-interpreting results, typically on a color scale that will help you identify deficiencies.

The equipment list needed for a good soil sample is short. All you need is a clean plastic bucket and a stainless-steel shovel or plastic trowel (don't contaminate your sample with metal tools). Dig holes 6 to 10 inches deep and put a half-inch slice along the side of the hole into your bucket. Take 5 to 10 samples from across your food plot and mix them in your bucket.

For send-away results, take a

sample from your bucket, put it in the collection bag, drop it in the mail and wait 2-3 weeks for results. For the DIY kits, you get to play scientist by adding soil, water and chemicals to vials and then interpreting color change (think pool test kit).

Fertilizer recommendations are reported in pounds-per-acre. Most fertilizer is purchased in bags with three numbers. The numbers are percentages of the total N, P and K. For example, a 50-pound bag of 19-19-19 includes 9.5 pounds each of N, P and K; the remaining 21.5 pounds is simply filler.

So if your soil test recommended 50 pounds each of N, P and K per acre, you would need to apply a bit more than five 50-pound bags of 19-19-19.

For more about soil testing and other habitat topics, view our new Habitat Information Sheets at pfhabitatstore.com/resources.

Make every acre count. Think habitat! ■