

It's a Complicated Life— Try Something Before You Decide You Don't Believe It

Last year my neighbor had a garden – 12 rows, each 20 feet long. He mixed four shovels of soil and sent two samples to the soil testing laboratory. He grew tomatoes, carrots, cabbage and seven other vegetables.

The recommendations, based on soil tests, included different rates and kinds of fertilizer for each vegetable, plus two rates of lime. When I told him an atomic absorption spectrophotometer was involved in the tests, his awe knew no bounds – the gospel according to “St. Science.”

He followed the instructions to the letter, buying many different bags of fertilizer – a real bookkeeping job. How did his garden turn out? Very well.

Has the precision of soil testing reached a new level? While soil testing and plant analysis are valuable diagnostic tools, we may be guilty of over-estimating their accuracy . . . not because of the electronic instrumentation, which is highly sophisticated . . . but because of the errors which are easily made in getting a “representative” sample . . . or because recommendations and interpretations are based on old yield levels with outdated varieties.

The key element in precision farming is the soil test. To interpret it properly requires a vast knowledge of physical as well as chemical soil characteristics and past production history.

Latest analytical equipment, grid patterns, computers, variable rates . . . do we have research data to justify the use of these new tools.? If not, perhaps we need to focus resources, because agriculture needs new, innovative thinking and new, innovative practices. ■

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