Check Your Soil, Sir?

How much easier it is to be critical than to be correct.

Sixty-five years ago I was among the few who were enthusiastic about soil testing. Calibrations and correlations between soil tests and field response were in the early stages. Methodology left much to be desired, ranging all the way from spot plates and color charts to long, tedious laboratory analysis designed to define "available" nutrients.

Today there is increasing acceptance of the soil test, alone, as a means of determining exact needs for fertilizers or soil amendments. One reason for this is the marvel of modern chemical methods and the widespread computerization of analysis and recommendations.

Some scientists, especially non-agricultural scientists, accept the soil sample as defining accurately the area involved, and the test itself as a highly precise method for determining that year's fertilizer needs. Then, let the computer do the rest.

Many such scientists have never had first-hand involvement with soil sampling practices, or field experiments for calibration, or soil test variation with seasonal changes, or the effects of physical properties not reflected in chemical tests, or with different interpretations by different labs.

Twenty years ago, Reed and Nelson wrote, "Soil testing is an excellent diagnostic tool, a very useful means of monitoring soil fertility status. It is most useful when used with other diagnostic tools by those with experience and knowledge."

Let's be careful not to misuse these tools...by assuming more than the current research on sampling, calibration and correlation can deliver.

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