

September

Test your bulk soilless potting media before planting greenhouse crops.

Before planting greenhouse crops, propagating woody plants or beginning seasonal flower production, commercial producers should sample and test the bulk soilless media they plan to grow their plants in. The procedure, known as saturated media extract (SME), measures nutrient concentration, electrical conductivity and pH. The cost is \$5 per sample for North Carolina residents and \$25 for out-of-state residents, and test results are available online two working days after samples are checked in to the laboratory. Sampling instructions and sample information forms can be found online at www.ncagr.gov/agronomi/uyrmedia.

Prepare gardens for fall/winter.

First, if you haven't had your soil tested in the last three years, do it now! Instructions for collecting samples are online at www.ncagr.gov/agronomi/uyrst.htm#sampling. Act now because after October the lab will begin receiving end-of-season samples from farmers, and the wait for reports will be longer.

If your report indicates that lime should be applied to raise soil pH, don't delay. Winter soil is usually moist and helps lime neutralize soil acidity before spring planting. However, don't add lime unless the soil report recommends it! Excess lime can make some nutrients unavailable to plants.

Second, consider protecting garden soils by planting a cover crop or putting out mulch. Legumes—such as crimson clover, hairy vetch, Austrian winter pea—add nitrogen to the soil as well as organic matter when they decompose in the spring. In addition, crimson clover is a beautiful sight when it blooms! Another option is to plant greens such as mustard or kale and enjoy eating the small leaves as they grow.

If you don't plant a cover crop, you should apply a 2-inch layer of mulch, such as composted leaf material, shredded or chipped pine bark, or pine needles. Straw can also be used if it is good quality without weed seeds. The mulch should be thick enough to reduce weed seed germination and retain soil moisture without impeding adequate water and air movement.

Once you have made these preparations, do not apply fertilizer until spring unless you are planting a fall vegetable garden. In that case, you can still follow these suggestions (even sowing a cover crop around the vegetable beds!), but you will also need to apply fertilizer as recommended on your soil report.