

# Beth Young

G A R D E N D E S I G N

Info Sheet #2-B

## Taking a Soil Sample

### **Step 1**

Look at your garden. Do you have different soil areas? Perhaps one part of your garden is under some fir trees, while another area is out in the open. I would test these areas separately because, over the years, the fir needle-fall may have affected the soil composition below. Other “soil areas” could be: a steep slope, an area which is soggy or under water part of the year, or an area where you have (or will have) acid-loving plants, such as *Rhododendrons*. Lawns and vegetable gardens should always be tested separately.

For each soil area, label a clean plastic bag (i.e. “fir trees” and “meadow”). Zip-lock (or equivalent) sandwich-size bags work well.

### **Step 2**

Gather and clean the following tools: a spade, trowel, plastic bucket, and bulb planter (if you have one).

In your garden, take at least three 1-cup samples from each “soil area.” It’s important that you take the soil sampling from where the roots are—at least 6” deep. For lawns, 2-4” deep is appropriate.

Tip: I use the shovel or bulb planter to get around 6” deep, then remove any soil that has fallen into the hole. I use the trowel to get about a cup of native, undisturbed soil. (Usually, the native soil is quite hard and clayey, so it’s not hard to tell it apart from the looser top layer.)

Mix the soil well in the bucket, and put about a cup in a zip-lock bag labeled for that area. Toss the extra soil. Now do the same for the other area(s).

### **Step 3**

If the soil is wet, let it dry for a few hours or days on some grocery bags (this will not change the soil composition). If you want the soil to be tested for nitrogen (N), you will need to keep the soil cold, or dry the soil immediately.

### **Step 4**

Put all of the sealed bags of soil in a box, and send to the laboratory along with the check and a cover letter. In the cover letter, you will want to include:

- Your name, address, and daytime phone number.
- Information about the various areas of the site and what you plan on growing there. For example, you might say: “Area 1, labeled ‘fir trees’, is under douglas firs, and *Rhododendrons* and azaleas will be grown there.”
- If your land drains to a pond (because high phosphorus levels could damage the aquatic ecosystem).
- What sort of fertilizers you will be using: chemical, organic or a combination.