



CMG GardenNotes #251

Asking Effective Questions About Soils

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Communications

Education, the product of Colorado State University Extension, is about communication. Are there ways we can make our communications with clients more effective? One way is to improve our questioning technique. Another is to focus on soil conditions, which contribute to a large percentage of landscape plant disorders. If we don't know how to ask our clients effective questions about their soils, we will have difficulty diagnosing their plant problems.

Many of the questions asked should be about physical soil properties, not chemical ones. Poor physical soil conditions for plant growth make up the bulk of soil concerns. Soil tests tell us about texture but little else relating to soil's physical conditions. A routine soil test is often a poor tool for figuring out a plant growth problem. Compaction, poor drainage, and low oxygen levels are the most frequent causes of poor root growth, which are not assessed by a soil test.

Physical properties of soil include texture (mineral solids), soil structure, and pore space of a soil.

Ask Open Ended Questions

Ask questions that require long answers. While occasional yes-no answers may help, be sure to stay on track with questions requiring more detailed answers. Do this by using **what**, **how**, **when**, **where**, and perhaps **why** leads:

- Tell me about your soil.
- Describe your soil for me.
- Is the soil part of your landscape or one that you brought in?
- How does your soil react when you water it?
- How do you care for your soil?
- Have you/when did you amend your soil?
- How often do you till your soil?
- What do you add to the soil?
- What worms or other living things do you see in the soil?

Be careful with “why” questions. They can sound accusatory and get in the way of gathering information.

Piggyback Questions

Remember to “piggyback” your new questions on top of the answers already obtained. Example – “Let’s talk about your soil in a little more detail. Is it a clayey or a sandy soil?” Avoid negative presuppositions. For example, ask “Have you amended your soil? What amendment did you use?” Do not accusingly ask, “You didn’t amend your soil with fresh manure, did you?” Other questions to consider are:

- Have you dug down into the soil?
- What is it like?
- Was it easy to dig?
- How deep did you dig down?

The following questions aim at assessing compaction and what may have been done to prevent it.

- Have you tried inserting a screwdriver into the soil? Did it go in easily or was it hard to insert?
- Do people frequently walk over that soil?
- Does any equipment or vehicles run over the soil?
- Does water enter easily or run off the soil?
- Is the soil mulched? What mulch was used?

Active Listening

Use “active listening” techniques or paraphrasing to restate what you have learned. By stating what is understood, both you and the client confirm a reference point to proceed in the conversation. An example is “So, you’re saying that your soil is a clay that is not mulched and not frequently walked on?”

This may lead to a clarifying statement such as “That is not what I’m saying. What I mean is ...” This is okay because it can clarify important points in the communication.

Neutral Comments

Another way to keep the exchange moving is to use neutral comments. These comments acknowledge listening and prompt further information. Tone is important in using neutral comments. Sound interested but do not insert judgmental overtones into the comments. Examples of neutral comments are:

- You noticed a white substance in the soil.
- You didn’t find any earthworms.
- You used deicing salts on the walk.

Wait Time

Use “wait time.” Don’t be afraid of “dead air” in a conversation. It’s common to want to keep the conversation going by keeping the air filled with talk. Ask the client a question then pause for the answer. They may take some time to get their thoughts together, remember what happened, or consider how to get their words out before they respond. Don’t be tempted to fill in a question before they have a chance to answer the last one.

- Does your soil crumble easily when you press on the clods? *PAUSE.*
- How much compost did you add to the soil when you planted? *PAUSE.*

Listen For

Listening for information is an important skill to develop. When listening for information, you pick up clues to pursue with further questions. This approach has a higher probability of leading to solving a problem. It is very different than a **“listen from”** point of view that tries to fit information into a preconceived scenario. “Listen for” often pursues false leads, eliminates them, and then pursues other trails. This kind of detective work can be fun, and only practice will enable you to develop this skill.

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