

David G. Hallauer
District Extension Agent
Crops & Soils/Horticulture

Phosphorous Decisions

Nitrogen gets most of the attention – with good reason – but all nutrients play a role in how well a crop will respond to our fertility management. As fertilizer input prices reach heights we haven't seen in a while, it might be time to take a look at exactly what your crop needs – or doesn't – as decisions are made for the 2022 cropping year. Phosphorous (P) is one example.

In plants, P is involved in respiration and energy transfer as well as cell division and function. In short, without an adequate supply of P, plant growth is diminished, maturity delayed, and yield reduced – none of which are positive for production. On the other hand, over application of P can cause problems from a water quality standpoint. This environmental consideration, not to mention the economic implications associated with over application, should give us pause to reflect on whether we need to continue to apply phosphorous fertilizer or not.

The decision on applying fertilizer is best guided by a soil test. Only when you have a solid number can you start to make solid decisions. If your soil test comes back below five parts per million (not uncommon in forage stands), the probability of a response to fertilizer will likely be high (greater than 85 percent for corn) and the magnitude of that response will be high as well. On the other end of the spectrum, soil tests approaching 20 parts per million will have a lower response probability (only 10 percent in corn) with the level of response lower as well.

From an economics standpoint, knowing soil test P levels can help you start to make decisions on whether you can potentially take a year off or if doing so will only get you that much more behind. Like it or not, there are times when taking a year off might make some short term economic gains, but can lead to larger issues down the road (broomsedge bluestem infestations in pasture are a prime example).

Don't have a recent soil test? Now is a great time to get one. Just be sure you are doing so to get an accurate number (don't pick the best areas of the field, make sure you get at least 15 cores per sample, etc...). Need assistance? Give us a shout and we'll discuss a program for you.

Tree Leaf Management

They held on awhile, but leaf fall has begun. To rake or not to rake, that is the question.

A scattering of leaves won't hurt the lawn. It's not until sunlight is prevented from reaching turf that we worry as energy needed to help carry the plant through winter is reduced.

Do you just bag them? Maybe. Maybe you want to consider composting them instead. Composted leaves are often ready by next spring to be used in vegetable and flower gardens.

Don't want to take that time? Incorporate directly instead. Use a lawn mower with a bagging attachment to collect leaves. Apply chopped up leaves in a two to three-inch layer on the soil surface and till in, repeating every couple of weeks until you run out of leaves or soils become too wet.

If you want to leave them on the turf surface, mow them. A mulching mower works best, but even a good side discharge mower can be effective. Mow while you can still see blades of turf through the leaves. It's simple and effective, with five years of research at Michigan State confirming no long term effects from as much one pound of leaves per square yard of lawn (one pound is equal to approximately six inches of leaves piled on the grass).

For easy fall leaf management, don't put the mower away just yet.