

Dig A Little, Learn A Lot!

As temperatures go UP, it's an excellent time for farmers, ranchers, and gardeners to focus their attention down to the soil below them. A check-up of your soil's health gives clues of your ground's ability to feed plants, hold water, capture carbon, and more. No fancy equipment required. Just grab a shovel and prepare your senses

“It doesn't matter what kind of landowner you are, says Natural Resource Specialist Lyle Frees with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). “Small farmers, large farmers, organic farmers, and even home gardeners can all benefit from this simple discovery project of one of their most important resources.

With your shovel, nose, eyes, and hands ready, Frees suggests the following steps to investigate soil health:

LOOK— Look for plant residue on the soil surface and a living canopy or cover. The soil structure should look like chocolate cake with air holes permeating throughout. You should see organic matter and live roots that extend way down. And of course, you should see earthworms—our wonderful soil engineers!

SMELL—Healthy soil should have the aroma of geosmin, which is a by-product of soil microbes called actinomycetes. Geosmin has a sweet, earthy aroma like nothing else.

TOUCH—Soil should be loose and crumble easily. In healthy soil, roots can grow straight and deep, allowing plants to reach nutrients and water they need to produce the food we love to eat.

“We are blessed with productive soils in Kansas,” says Frees. We want to keep them that way and even build them where possible.” In addition to the vital production of soil health to the individual farmer or gardener, Frees explains that healthy soil has a direct impact on many larger issues that affect life as we know it. Healthy soil holds, filters, and regulates water; mitigates drought and flooding; reduces runoff and erosion; cycles nutrients; sequesters carbon; and suppresses weeds and pests naturally—all while supporting our homes and buildings. For all these reasons, NRCS has recently launched a nationwide effort to “Unlock the Secrets of the Soil.”

Not sure your soil passes the soil health test? Visit the Soil Health portal at

<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/soils/health/> or contact your local NRCS office.

For more information about NRCS and its programs, stop by your local USDA Service Center or go to the Web site www.ks.nrcs.usda.gov. Follow us on Twitter @NRCS_Kansas. USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.