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Don't guess. . . Soil Test! Grow healthy plants, save money, protect water quality



Soil test box and educational material included in a Don't Guess. . . Soil Test! kit

Americans love to garden. It's a fact. Data from surveys conducted by the National Garden Association indicate 80 percent of people age 18 and older engage in some aspect of gardening. In Oakland County that's nearly 900,000 people!

The presence of more than 1,400 lakes in Oakland County means that intense interest in gardening and horticulture has the potential to negatively affect water quality through use of fertilizers, particularly those containing phosphorus.

The potential threat is enormous, since the impact of lakes on residential property value in the county is estimated at \$1 billion. To help protect local lakes and keep area gardens growing, MSU Extension examined creative ways to encourage county residents to test their soils before making decisions about adding fertilizer and other amendments to their yards and gardens.

As a result, since April 2001, "Don't Guess. . . Soil Test!" (DGST) has been available to local residents. Local retail stores sell MSU soil test kits and collect the soil samples. Master Gardener volunteers pick up the samples and deliver them to the MSU Soil and Nutrient Testing Laboratory.

Results are returned to the MSUE Oakland County office, where horticulture staff members review results and make recommendations.

In July 2009, MSUE conducted a survey to follow up with 593 individuals who participated in DGST from 2006 through 2009. Responses from the 220 who completed the survey included:

- 79 percent reported that using DGST was the first time they had their soil tested
- 87 percent reported they did so to grow healthier plants
- 33 percent reported they did so to protect the environment
- 30 percent did so to save money
- 52 percent changed the amount of fertilizer applied
- 41 percent read fertilizer labels more carefully
- 77 percent saw improvements in their lawn or garden
- 70 percent recommended soil testing to others
- 82 percent said they wanted more information on environmentally sound gardening and lawn care practices
- As a result, all changed the type their fertilizer they use
- 91 percent reported the convenience of DGST was a significant factor in their decision to have their soil tested.

"My lawn has NEVER looked better-my neighbors actually ask me what I am doing."

"The grass is greener and I spent less money."

"I learned there was no need for phosphorus and lime would be helpful"

Quotes from participants in the
"Don't Guess...Soil Test!" program

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How to keep food safe: residents ask, MSU Extension responds



MSU Extension food safety educator Robin Danto helping Oakland County residents keep their food safe.

Where do Oakland County residents turn when they want to learn how to safely preserve locally grown fresh produce at home? Where do they get accurate information on foods that have been recalled? Who do they ask how long deli meats can be kept and still be safe to serve the kids?

Staffers on the MSU Extension Food Safety Hotline have been answering these and about 3,500 other questions every year for more than two decades.

Food in the United States is the safest in the world. At the same time, there is constant risk along the route from farms around the world to the family dinner table.

In addition, all of us put ourselves at risk right at home by improperly handling our food when we get it into the house! This is the place on which MSU Extension places its focus – family homes.

Calls are taken every day. However, there are certain, predictable times when calls increase.

- During short power outages (how long is the food in my refrigerator and freezer safe?)
- Before major holidays (how do I thaw my turkey safely?)
- After major holidays (how long are leftovers safe to eat?)
- During long power outages (is it safe to use dry ice and where do I get it?)

- When fresh produce is abundant (how do I know when tomatoes are ready to can, how do I can pickles, why did some of my jars not seal, why did my sauerkraut mold and is it still safe to can?)
- When there is a food recall (the outbreak of *Escherichia coli* from ground beef resulted in more than a 50% increase of calls for two weeks)

Staff members respond to questions, send printed information and make referrals to the Oakland County Health Division when that is appropriate.

Local reporters and editors work with MSUE staff to get reliable information for printed articles and online publications.

A follow-up telephone survey was conducted to determine the value of the Food Safety Hotline service. The audience surveyed included those who called the hotline during the 12 months of 2008.

- 90 percent said they followed the advice given
- 88 percent said they got a satisfactory response to their question
- 93percent said they would call the hotline again with additional questions
- 55 percent said they used the hotline more than once.

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For more information about any MSU Extension program, visit www.msue.msu.edu/oakland or call 248-858-0880.