



# Field Notes

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## Look deeper at soil fertility

We have all heard the old saying that “beauty is only skin deep”. The same kind of thing may be true for some of the fields where we grow crops. There are several situations in which the problem of poor sub-soil fertility may develop. As with any discussion about soil fertility the subject can get very complicated but we can at least talk about some of the basic things that influence this situation that seems to be “cropping up” more frequently these days. When we talk about “soil fertility” the subject can vary a lot depending upon the background of those people in the discussion. For me the common sense approach to this is to include just about any factor that is present below the usual six inch sampling depths for the soil tests we conduct on a routine basis. When we broaden the subject it might include the usual things like soil pH, the levels of “macro” nutrients like phosphorous and potassium and even some of the minor or “micro” nutrients like sulfur, calcium, magnesium, zinc, boron, copper, iron, and as always “others”. Another possible issue may be the presence of reniform or root knot nematodes.

Then we can stray from the standard soil test values and get into things like poor drainage, compaction, toxic root restriction zones, and issues related to land leveling and drainage improvement. The soil test may reveal the problem that has been limiting yields but the issue may involve a combination of two or more of these items.

Through the years I have seen several instances of land that has been labeled as undesirable for growing crops only to see a different farmer take it and make it productive. The difference is usually nothing more than taking the time and making the effort to uncover the underlying issues and work toward correcting them. Usually there is a major issue that when corrected there may be a rapid improvement but there are often deeper problems that take years to overcome.

In recent weeks as I have visited with growers I have become aware that there are more of these isolated problem fields than I had expected. On one of the recent spring like days I visited a few of these areas and did some digging. Samples were taken at three levels from the surface to six inches, from six to twelve, and from twelve to eighteen inches.

The results from the Mississippi State Soil Testing Laboratory were somewhat surprising. Some of the standard depth samples showed soil pH and nutrient levels that were well within the range I would have expected after the good yields of cotton and soybeans we had in 2016. However the deeper samples dropped dramatically. Some of these came from farms that produced some of the best yields in the region while specific fields came in with yield levels at half or less of the higher yielding fields worked by the same grower.

I have used up a lot of my space in background so I will

just say that if there is a field that is not pulling its weight on a farm then a few basic things should be done. Pull the three levels of soil as described above and submit them to the testing lab. Use a penetration probe while the soil is well wetted to check for compaction zones.



Kylee Killebrew, at right, is pictured with Judge Brandon Morgan and her Reserve Champion/MS Bred Champion Light Mediumweight Market Goat at the 2017 Dixie National Junior Roundup Show in Jackson held February 2-19. Kylee capped her 11 years showing goats with her second Dixie National champion winning market goat. Kylee is the daughter of Tracy and Kenny Killebrew of Coxburg. (Photo by Betsy Padgett)

Submit samples from good and bad fields for nematode analysis comparisons. These tests will begin to provide the basis for making the determination about what the yield limiting problem(s) may be.

The methods for dealing with these problems may be apparent once the issue is uncovered, but in some cases the solution may get complicated. When this point is reached then we can talk about how to deal with it, but until we know what the “disease” is we can’t treat it. Thanks for your time.

## \*Volunteer

(Continued from page 6.) Natural History, and visit their congressional representatives on Capitol Hill. On May 8, 10 of the State Honorees – five middle level and five high school students – will be named America’s top youth volunteers of 2017.

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