RIO CLARO EAST SECONDARY SCHOOL

AGRICULTURAL SCIENCE

**SOILS**

SOIL PROFILES - : Soil Profile refers to the layers of soil; horizon A, B, and C. A soil profile is a cross section of these layers and it measures the different characteristics of each layer. Although every soil from around the world has a different soil profile, most soils consist of three or more layers, including the [topsoil](http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-topsoil.htm), subsoil, and bedrock.

 If you're wondering what horizon A is, here's your answer: horizon A refers to the upper layer of soil, nearest the surface. It is commonly known as topsoil. In the woods or other areas that have not been plowed or tilled, this layer would probably include organic litter, such as fallen leaves and twigs . The litter helps prevent erosion, holds moisture, and decays to form a very rich soil known as humus. Horizon A provides plants with nutrients they need for a great life.

The layer below horizon A, of course, has to be horizon B. Litter is not present in horizon B and therefore there is much less humus. Horizon B does contain some elements from horizon A because of the process of leaching. Leaching resembles what happens in a coffee pot as the water drips through the coffee grounds. Leaching may also bring some minerals from horizon B down to horizon C.

If horizon B is below horizon A, then horizon C must be below horizon B. Horizon C consists mostly of weatherized big rocks. This solid rock, as you discovered in Soil Formation, gave rise to the horizons above it.

Soil profiles look different in different areas of the world. They are affected by climate and other things.

PROPERTIES of SOIL

When discussing the properties of soil, these can be classed under two categories, namely;

1. **Physical properties**
2. **Chemical properties**

A soil’s suitability for cultivation is determined by both these categories. Let us look at both the categories in detail.

**Physical properties** – The physical properties of a soil relate to the physical attributes found in a particular soil. These are classed as:

**Texture** – texture is a measure of the different sized soil particles present in a sample of soil. (the relative proportions of sand, silt, and clay) is important in determining the water-holding capacity of soil:

1. Fine-textured soils hold more water than coarse-textured soils but may not be ideal
2. Medium-textured soils (loam family) are most suitable for plant growth
3. - Sands are the largest particles and feel gritty
4. - Silts are medium-sized and feel soft, silky, or floury
5. - Clays are the smallest sized particles and feel sticky and are hard to squeeze.
6. Relative size perspective: Sand (house) > Silt > Clay (penny)



**Structure** –

Soil structure is the shape that the soil takes based on its physical and chemical properties. Each individual unit of soil structure is called a ped. Take a sample of undisturbed soil in your hand (either from the pit or from the shovel or auger). Look closely at the soil in your hand and examine its structure. Possible choices of soil structure are:

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| --- | --- | --- |
| granular structure | blocky structure | prismatic structure |
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| **Granular**: Resembles cookie crumbs and is usually less than 0.5 cm in diameter. Commonly found in surface horizons where roots have been growing.  |

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| **Blocky**: Irregular blocks that are usually 1.5 - 5.0 cm in diameter.  |

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| **Prismatic**: Vertical columns of soil that might be a number of cm long. Usually found in lower horizons.  |

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| columnar structure | platy structure | singlegrained structure |
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| **Columnar**: Vertical columns of soil that have a salt "cap" at the top. Found in soils of arid climates.  |

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| **Platy**: Thin, flat plates of soil that lie horizontally. Usually found in compacted soil.  |

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| **Single Grained**: Soil is broken into individual particles that do not stick together. Always accompanies a loose consistence. Commonly found in sandy soils.  |

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| massive structure |  |  |
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| **Massive**: Soil has no visible structure, is hard to break apart and appears in very large clods.  |

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Properties of soil particle size -

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|   | **Sand** | **Silt** | **Clay** |
| **Porosity** | mostly large pores | small pores predominate | small pores predominate |
| **Permeability** | rapid | low to moderate | slow |
| **Water holding capacity** | limited | medium | very large |
| **Soil particle surface** | small | medium | very large |

**Soil Compaction** –

 Destroys the quality of the soil because it restricts rooting depth and decreases pore size. The effects are more water-filled pores less able to absorb water, increasing runoff and erosion, and lower soil temperatures. To reduce compaction:

1. Add organic matter
2. Make fewer trips across area
3. Practice reduced-till or no-till systems
4. Harvest when soils are not wet

**Chemical Properties of Soil** – the chemical properties of a soil determines its nutrient holding capacity and its fertility, i.e. how well it can sustain plant life. These are:

1. pH
2. Salinity (EC)
3. Cation exchange capacity (CEC)
4. Organic matter
5. C:N ratio (Carbon to Nitrogen)

**Soil pH** –

This is a measure of the acidity or alkalinity of a soil.

Neutral = 7.0

Acidic < 7.0

Alkaline > 7.0

 pH is measured on a pH Scale –



Soil pH and plant growth:

Affects availability of plant nutrients (in general, optimal pH is between 5.5-7.5)

Low pH soils (<6.0) results in an increase in Al. Aluminum is toxic to plants

Affects availability of toxic metals (in general, more available in acidic soils)

Affects the activity of soil microorganisms, thus affecting nutrient cycling and disease risk

Nutrient Availability



**Soil salinity** -

This is a potential problem in irrigated soils due to high evaporation rates and low annual rainfall leaving salts to accumulate.

Salts can come from irrigation water, fertilizers, composts, and manure.

Salts can be leached by slowly applying excess water.

Three inches removes about 50% of the soluble salts.

Five inches removes about 90%.

**Cation-Exchange Capacity** -

A cation is a positively charged ion. Most nutrients are cations: Ca2+, Mg2+, K +, NH4 +, Zn2+, Cu2+, and Mn2+. These cations are in the soil solution and are in dynamic equilibrium with the cations adsorbed on the surface of clay and organic matter. CEC is a measure of the quantity of cations that can be adsorbed and held by a soil. CEC is dependent upon the amount of organic matter and clay in soils and on the types of clay. In general, the higher OM and clay content, the higher the CEC.

**Soil Organic Matter** –



Beneficial impacts of SOM on soil properties:

1. Physical - stabilizes soil structure, improves water holding characteristics, lowers bulk density, dark color may alter thermal properties
2. Chemical - higher CEC, acts as a pH buffer, ties up metals, interacts with xenobiotics
3. Biological - supplies energy and body-building constituents for soil organisms, increases microbial populations and their activities, source and sink for nutrients, ecosystem resilience, affects soil enzymes

Each year, about 1 to 4% of nutrients in the soil organic matter are released through microbial transformations to become available to plants. Release is highest under warm, moist conditions and slowest in cool dry climates. Microorganisms are the driving force for nutrient release to plants.

