Reading Your Soil Test

The whole report, decoded on one page. Order of operations: pH first, then the big three, then the long game.

1 · START WITH pH — IT CONTROLS THE MENU

When pH is off, nutrients can be present in the soil yet locked away from roots. Most vegetables want the slightly acidic range below. **Too low?** Garden lime raises pH. **Too high?** Elemental sulfur lowers it. Both work slowly — adjust gently, then retest before adding more.



2 · THE BIG THREE (repair only what the report says is LOW)

NUTRIENT	WHAT IT RUNS	HUNGRY LOOKS LIKE	ORGANIC REPAIR
N — Nitrogen	Leafy green growth	Older leaves go pale or yellow; growth stalls	Finished compost; alfalfa meal or blood meal for a stronger push
P — Phosphorus	Roots, flowers, fruit	Purple-tinged leaves; stingy flowering	Bone meal or rock phosphate — *only on a low test; excess feeds algae in creeks, not tomatoes*
K — Potassium	Vigor, stems, stress resistance	Browning leaf edges; weak stems	Kelp meal; wood ash sparingly (it also raises pH)

3 · ORGANIC MATTER — THE LONG GAME

The number regeneration cares about most. Organic matter holds water and nutrients (the very things that drain straight through woody, bagged mixes) and feeds the soil life that does the real work. **Low? The repair is finished compost, worked in, year after year.** It is also the all-purpose fix for fast-draining, thirsty store-bought mix.

THE GOLDEN RULES — Don’t guess: test · Fix pH before chasing nutrients · Never overshoot phosphorus · Compost every year · Retest before you amend again

4 · WHERE TO GET TESTED

Thurston County: the Thurston Conservation District tests soil for backyard gardeners and farms alike — weekday sample drop-off at their Tumwater office, lab analysis, and a plain-language interpretive report (thurstoncd.com). **Everywhere else:** your county conservation district or university extension office runs a program like it, or will point you to the lab they trust. Sample each growing area separately — the raised bed and the in-ground plot are different citizens.

Sources: Oregon State University Extension, Soil Test Interpretation Guide, EC 1478 (extension.oregonstate.edu) · University of Minnesota Extension, Interpreting Your Soil Test Results (extension.umn.edu) · Illinois Extension, Interpreting Test Results (extension.illinois.edu/soil) · Iowa State University Extension, How to Interpret Soil Test Results (yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu) · UMass Extension, Bagged Potting Mixes and Garden Soils (umass.edu) · WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners, What’s in Your Bag of Potting Soil? (skagitmg.org) · Thurston Conservation District, Soil & Nutrient Testing (thurstoncd.com).
Companion article: “Understanding Soil Tests: How to Repair Store-Bought Garden Mix,” The GreenLife Project, June 2026 — tawnholstra.com.

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