

# NRCS NEWS RELEASE

United States Department of Agriculture • Natural Resources Conservation Service  
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## Dig A Little, Learn A Lot!

ST PAUL, MN, April 4, 2013 – As temperatures go UP and the weather begins to feel more Spring-like, it is the perfect time to focus your attention by looking DOWN at the ground. It's time to investigate your SOIL. The newest trend for production agriculture—and conservation farmers—is using cover crops. The new emphasis is to improve the health of their soil.

“It doesn't matter what kind of landowner you are, a small farmer, large farmer, organic grower or even homeowners and gardeners. You can easily examine your soils. Take a quick look and you can learn a lot,” says Doug Miller, Soil Scientist.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is the federal agency created to protect our nation's natural resources. NRCS' recent push is to “Unlock the Secrets of the Soil.” According to State Conservationist Don Baloun, “We are blessed with productive soils in Minnesota. NRCS' helps people sustain healthy soils and improve the health of soils that need help.” To investigate your soils level of health, you'll need a few simple tools:

- A garden spade or shovel
- Your nose
- Your eyes
- Your hands

**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 byproduct of soil microbes called *actinomyces*. 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.

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Why should we care about soil health? Miller explains that healthy soil is important for agriculture and our state's ability to feed the nation, but it actually has a direct impact on many larger issues that affect life as we know it.

Soil health can improve and regulate water, sustain plant and animal life, filter potential pollutants, cycle nutrients, and support building and structures. Healthy soils hold more water, which can reduce flooding and help with drought. Healthy soils also resist runoff and erosion, they suppress weeds and pests naturally, and sustain our precious natural resources.

Simply put, healthy soils are productive soils and they are important to every one of us. So once the ground thaws a bit, grab a spade and dig a little. You can learn a lot! Visit <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/soils/health/>

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