



HEALTHY SOILS ARE: *high in organic matter.*

Newsletter article #5

OM: Choose it. Don't lose it.

Organic matter is vital to healthy soils, yet most modern agricultural operations are not managed in ways to retain high levels. Only half the original organic matter remains in most modern cultivated soils. In general, organic matter levels have fallen from 5-6 percent of the soil to less than 3 percent on most cropland soils.

Using tillage depletes organic matter. Each time the soil is tilled, oxygen is stirred into it, stimulating microbial action to decompose organic matter at an accelerated rate. As a matter of fact, when a woodland is cleared and planted or a prairie is plowed, most of the organic matter that was built over hundreds of years is lost within 10 years of tillage.

Combining frequent tillage with farming practices that leave little plant residue for soil microbes to eat (such as burning or removing crop residues) will lead to the depletion of organic matter.

To learn more about soil health, and to meet some of the farmers who are “Unlocking the Secrets in the Soil,” visit www.nrcs.usda.gov.

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