



Will lime fix your garden woes?

By Sue Gwise, *Consumer Horticulture Educator*



Recently, I was reading an article in a popular gardening magazine. The article listed several autumn gardening chores. One item said you should apply lime to your lawn before winter. *This is the problem with blanket recommendations.* They don't apply to everyone and rarely apply to us up here in northern New York.

Never apply lime to lawns or gardens without getting a pH level first. Unfortunately, lime is considered a panacea for everything. I have talked to people that have used lime as an insecticide, fungicide, fertilizer and even as a snake repellent! The only one of these uses that has any validity is the fertilizer use. Lime does add a certain amount of calcium and magnesium to the soil, but that is all.

The main purpose of liming is to raise the pH of the soil. Many areas in New York State (and some in Jefferson County) have acid soils. This means that their pH levels are low (readings below 6.0). In order to raise the pH to a level that plants will thrive in, lime is added to the soil. Lime is an effective tool if your pH is low but, *you have to know the pH level first.* The majority of the soils in Jefferson County are alkaline. That means they have a pH above 7. Adding lime to these soils will raise the pH even higher, out of the range that plants need for proper growth. High pH levels can lead to nitrogen, iron and manganese deficiencies in the soil. The pH rise caused by lime is only temporary, but it will last long enough to disrupt an entire gardening season. Measures can be taken to lower soil pH, but it is a slow process.

Many people also like to add wood ashes to their gardens. Wood ash also has the same effect as lime; it raises the pH of the soil. I have tested many soils where the plants are doing poorly, only to find that the soil had extremely high pH levels (above 8.0). When I investigated the reason for the high pH, I found out that wood ash had been added to the garden year after year. Once again, wood ashes should never be added to the soil unless you know the pH first. They work great in acid soils, but in soils that are already alkaline, wood ashes will cause problems.

The bottom line is: ***test your soil pH before adding lime or wood ashes.*** Free pH testing is available at the Cornell Cooperative Extension offices in Watertown. We can advise you on what you should add to your soil depending on the pH results and what crop you are growing.



Native limestone, such as this outcropping along the Black River, contributes to alkaline soils. Photo: Wikimedia

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