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Moisture Characteristics of Tennessee Soils

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in cooperation with the Soil Conservation Service U. S. Department of Agriculture

CONTENTS

MOISTURE CHARACTERISTICS OF REPRESENTATIVE TENNESSEE SOILS^I

by

T. J. Longwell,² W. L. Parks,³ and M. E. Springer³

INTRODUCTION

STORAGE and release of moisture are important factors affecting
Sthe use and conservation of soils. Soils differ greatly in their mois-TORAGE and release of moisture are important factors affecting ture holding capacities and the relative energies at which the moisture is held. Plants differ greatly in their capacity to utilize soil water. Thus, it is essential that a study of soil moisture properties be based on the adsorption energy of the water by the soil.

The soil moisture-crop relationships that must be considered in arriving at sound decisions about suitable uses of soils for crop production, particularly where irrigation is involved, include:

- 1. Amount of water held by a soil.
- 2. Moisture release patterns indicating the amounts of water held at different energy levels.
- 3. Moisture movement within a soil.
- 4. Extent of effective soil-plant root contact.

The physical measurements presented here may be useful in management and use of soils. In many cases, the data may be applied to other soils possessing similar properties.

- 1. This work was conducted under Regional Research Project S-24 and the National Cooperative Soil Survey Program.
- 2. Soil Scientist, Soil Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- 3. Professor and Associate Professor of Agronomy, University of Tennessee Agricultural Experiment Station, respectively.

Samples were taken from the main horizons of many of the important agricultural soils of Tennessee to investigate their physical properties. The samples were from soils in all parts of the State, were from many parent materials, and represent soils in several stages of development.

Locations of the general soil areas in Tennessee are shown in Figure 1. In west Tennessee are the Mississippi River bottoms, the loessial plains, and the coastal plains (Areas 13-17 in Fig. 1). Area 17, and the many smaller bottoms throughout the State, are largely Alluvial soils which are among the more productive soils in the State. The upland soils of Areas 16 and 15 were mainly developed in medium to deep loess. Well-drained Gray-Brown Podzolics and soils with fragipans at about 2 feet are quite extensive in this area.

Toward the eastern edge of Area 15, soils developed in Coastal Plain material are common - especially on the steeper slopes. In Areas 14 and 13 are mainly soils developed in Coastal Plain material with smaller acreages of soil from shallow loess over Coastal Plain material, principally on the gently-sloping uplands. Here, as in most of the Areas to the east, the soils are predominantly Red-Yellow-Podzolics with smaller acreages of soils with fragipans.

In Middle Tennessee are the Highland Rim (Areas 4, 7, II, and 12 in Fig. I) and the Central Basin (Areas 8, 9, and 10 in Fig. I). Soils of the Highland Rim, many of which are cherty, were formed mainly from cherty limestone residuum. On the broad, gently-sloping plateaus, where the upper foot or two is derived from loess, the soils are more silty in nature and many, such as the Dickson silt loam, have fragipans. The soils in Area 4 were developed in old alluvium. The soils of the Central Basin were formed mainly from limestone residuum; shallow and rocky soils are commonly intermingled with the more productive soils.

In East Tennessee are the Cumberland Plateau and escarpment, the Great Valley and the Smoky Mountains (Areas I, 2, 3, 5, and ⁶ and part of Area 4, the Sequatchie Valley, in Fig. 1). Soils of the escarpment (Area 5) and of the Cumberland Plateau (Area 6) were formed mainly from sandstone and shale. Again shallow and rocky soils are common.

Soils of the Great Valley (Areas 2 and 3) were developed in residuum from limestone, sandstone, and shale and in places from old alluvium. Here, as in Area 4, Reddish-Brown Lateritics are intermingled with the more prevalent Red-Yellow-Podzolic soils. Soils of Area I, the Smoky Mountains, were not sampled. The Sequatchie Valley portion of Area 4 includes soils mainly from old alluvium.

Sampling sites were selected to represent important soil types of wide distribution and extent which are usually intensively farmed. Detailed

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-
- 3. Dondridge-Needmore
- 4. Cumberland-Waynesboro-Decotur
-
- 7. Mountview-Dickson-Bodine
- 8. Dellrose-Mimoso-Rockland
- 16. Memphis-Loring
- 17. Commerce-Robinsonville-Sharkey-Dundee

Figure 1. General soil areas of Tennessee.

descriptions of each profile were made at the time of sampling but are not included in this report. Nomenclature used in descriptions was in accordance with the Soil Survey Manual (II).

Methods

Sites were selected and sampled by soil scientists of the Soil Conservation Service and the University of Tennessee. At each site two to five 3- x 3-inch core samples were obtained using Uhland's (12) methods. Bulk samples were also taken from each horizon. Capillary porosity and moisture content at 60 centimeters tension were determined from measurements on a tension table (Fig. 2). Saturated permeability, total porosity, and bulk densities were also determined on the cores.

The bulk samples were air-dried, ground, and sieved through a 2 millimeter sieve. Methods described by Richards and his co-workers

Figure 2. **moisture tension table used to determine capillary porosity and moisture content at 60 em. tension.**

(7, 8, 9, 10) were used to determine moisture contents at 1/3 atmosphere tension on the ceramic pressure plate apparatus, Figure 3, and at the 2, 5, 9 and 15 atmospheres tension by pressure membrane apparatus, Figure 4.

Figure 3. Saturated soil samples on a ceramic pressure plate for the 1/3 atmosphere tension determination.

Textures were estimated in the field at the time of sampling. Porosity was calculated from bulk density and 60 centimeters tension measurements. Available water holding capacities in percent by volume were calculated by two methods. Both used 15 atmosphere and bulk density determinations. One used the moisture content of sieved samples equilibrated at l/3 atmosphere tension and the other used the moisture content of the core samples equilibrated at 60 centimeters tension as upper moisture limits. They are reported by horizon in inches of water per inch of soil depth.

All methods have certain limitations and the results from some samples may not reflect the exact moisture characteristics that exist under field conditions. The moisture held in the soil at low tensions is the moisture that occupies the larger pores. The surface soil generally has a greater percentage of large pores than other horizons. It also experiences the greatest change in pore size distribution over time as it is the cultivated horizon or the one most disturbed by man.

In such a system that is constantly changing, one would not expect a specific moisture content at field capacity as it would also be changing, being a function of the pore size distribution. The moisture content

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Figure 4. Saturated soil samples on a pressure membrane for the 2, 5, 9 or 15 atmosphere tension determination.

at 15 atmospheres tension would not be so greatly affected. Consequently, the readings on the sieved samples seem to suffice for the wilting percentage. Field capacity actually is around 1/10 to 1/3 atmosphere tension (2, 3). It is perhaps close to 1/10 atmosphere for the coarser-textured soils but nearer to $1/3$ atmosphere for the medium- to fine-textured soils. In these studies slightly over 70% of the surface samples had higher moisture contents at 60 centimeters tension on the core samples than at 1/3 atmosphere tension on sieved samples. However, in the subsoils only about 40% of the samples had higher moisture contents at 60 centimeters tension on core samples than at 1/3 atmosphere tension on sieved samples. This is essentially a reflection of the pore size distribution and bulk densities in the different horizons. Sieving of the subsoil samples changed the amount and size distribution of pores, resulting in an increase in the amount of larger pores generally filled at field capacity. Since the core samples from the A horizons had more pore space in the size range generally filled at field capacity, the net change by sieving was less than for the subsoils.

Since cherty soils were a special problem, samples for bulk density determinations were taken with a 12- x 12- x 6-inch sharpened steel

frame. The weights of chert and fine soil were obtained after separation by sieving. Densities of the chert and the soil were determined. Moisture contents at the different moisture tensions were determined on the $\langle 2 \text{ mm.}$ soil fraction, and the available water holding capacities for the fine soil fractions were calculated. The volume of soil solids were calculated using a particle density of 2.60 for A horizons and 2.65 for all other horizons. These values represent the average from a large number of particle density measurements. The moisture holding capacity of the cherty soils was calculated from these determinations and it was assumed that the chert would not hold water for plant growth.

Results **and** Discussion

Data for each individual horizon of the different soils are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3. Permeability rates in some of the samples were high. Some of these samples were probably obtained when the soil moisture content was below optimum for taking core samples. Sampling soil horizons $-$ particularly fragipans $-$ at lower than optimum moisture content may cause cracks in the cores that result in high permeability. Other samples probably contained earthworm or root channels that permitted rapid water movement through the core. A statistical study conducted by the Soil Conservation Service showed that the variability between cores selected at a site was large and that the variability between sites was equally large (6). The variability reported in this study is of comparable magnitude.

Volume 'composition at field capacity for profiles of four widely different Tennessee soils is shown in Figure 5. For simplicity, the water held between $1/3$ and 15 atmospheres tension is assumed to be the available water holding capacity $(A.W.H.C.).$ Decatur is a well-drained upland soil with a dark red day B horizon. Falaya is a silty, somewhat poorly-drained first bottom soil. Calloway is a silty, somewhat poorlydrained soil with a fragipan. Crossville is a well-drained loamy soil underlain by sandstone. .

In Table 4 are summarized the available water holding capacities of soils by regions and textures excluding the group of cherty soils. The available water holding capacities for the textural classes loam, silty clay loam, and silt loam were high with means ranging from 0.191 to 0.234 inches of available water per inch of soil depth. Silty clays, clay loams, and clays were medium in capacity with means ranging from 0.156 to 0.180 inches per inch. Coarser textures - fine sandy loams, sandy loams and loamy sands - also had lower means covering a wider range from 0.015 to 0.171 inches per inch.

The mean of 414 horizons was 0.203 inches of available water per inch of soil. Standard deviations of the means indicate the variability of the measurements in each textural classification where sample numbers were adequate.

The range in available water holding capacities within a given textural class may appear quite large. However, this may be expected when one considers the variation in the amount of sand, silt, clay, and organic matter within a textural class. Soil structure or arrangement of particles, as well as variations associated with the usual field estimates of textural class, may contribute further to differences in available water holding capacities.

Figure 5. Volume composition of four soil profiles at field capacity.

Table 1. Selected physical properties of major horizons of 78 East Tennessee soils.

* sil = silt loam, c = clay, sicl = silty clay loam, cl = clay loam, fsl = fine sandy loam, sl = sandy loam, ls = loamy sand, l = loam.
**These soil names have been dropped and soils combined in present mapping.

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t-.:l **Table 1 (Continued). Selected physical properties of major horizons of 78 East Tennessee soils.**

~

ii = silt loam, c = clay, sicl = silty clay loam, cl = clay loam, fsl = fine sandy loam, sl = sandy loam, Is = loamy sand, 1 = loam.
**These soil names have been dropped and soils combined in present mapping.

Table 1 (Continued). Selected physical properties of major horizons of 78 East Tennessee soils.

 $\frac{1}{2}$ sil = silt loam, c = clay, sicl = silty clay loam, cl = clay loam, fsl = fine sandy loam, sl = sandy loam, ls = loamy sand, 1 = loam.
**These soil names have been dropped and soils combined in present mapping.

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* sil = silt loam, c = clay, sicl = silty clay loam, cl = clay loam, fsl = fine sandy loam, sl = sandy loam, ls = loamy sand, l = loam. ** These soil names have been dropped and soils combined in present mapping.

Table 2. Selected physical properties of major horizons of 27 Middle Tennessee soils.

• sil \equiv silt loam, sicl \equiv silty clay loam, sic \equiv silty clay, c \equiv clay, 1 = loam, fsl \equiv fine sandy loam.

** Currently mapped Waynesboro but was originally mapped Cookeville.

~

[~] **Table ² (Continued). Selected physical properties of major horizons of ²⁷ Middle Tennessee soils.** [~]

* sil = silt loam, sicl = silty clay loam, sic = silty clay, c = clay, 1 = loam, fsl = fine sandy loam.

** Currently mapped Waynesboro but was originally mapped Cookeville.

t-:>

Table 3. Selected physical properties of major horizons of 24 West Tennessee soils.

* sil = silt loam, sicl = silty clay loam, ls = loamy sand, s = sand, fsl = fine sandy loam, si = silt, c = clay.

** These soil names have been dropped and soils combined in present mapping.

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t-.:l **Table 3 (Continued), Selected physical properties of major horizons of 24 West Tennessee Soils** ~

* sil = silt loam, sicl = silty clay loam, ls = loamy sand, s = sand, fsl = fine sandy loam, si = silt, c = clay. ** These soil names have been dropped and soils combined in present mapping.

Table 4. Average available water holding capacities* of soil textural groups expressed as inches per inch of soil depth.

"Based on 1/3 and 15 atmosphere measurements on sieved samples.

Table 4 (Continued>' Average available water holding capacities* of soil textural groups expressed as inches per inch of soil depth

"Based on 1/3 and 15 atmosphere measurements on sieved samples.

Figure 6 shows graphically the relationship between the mean available water holding capacities of the different textural classes. Increasing clay content lowers available water holding capacity but the relationship is not linear. Likewise, as sand replaces silt the available water holding capacity is lowered. Thus, high available moisture retention .values seem to be closely related to amount of silt and very fine sand. These results agree with those of other workers (I, 4, 5).

In general, the available water holding capacities of the soils were highest in West Tennessee, intermediate in Middle Tennessee, and lowest in East Tennessee. Bottom soils had higher available water holding capacities than upland soils. Soils containing a large amount of silt or very fine sand had higher values than those with appreciable quantities of clay or medium and coarse sand.

In Table 5 are given groupings of soils with similar profile characteristics; members of each group may be expected to have similar available water holding properties. In each group are Tennessee soils for which moisture data are presented along with certain selected similar soils to which the data may be applied. This grouping is designed to aid in soil management predictions.

Table 6 shows the correlation coefficients between permeability and aeration porosity for the A and B horizons. The significant "r" values of 0.69 for A horizons and the 0.74 for B horizons indicate that permeability depended considerably on aeration porosity.

Figure 6. Mean available water holding capacities of Tennessee soil samples having different textures.

Data on eight cherty soils are given in Tables 7 and 8. Available water holding capacities of the cherty silt loams ranged from 0.07 inches per inch of soil for a horizon containing 32.6% chert by volume to 0.25 inches per inch for a soil having 20.2% chert by volume. Mean available water holding capacity of the 12 cherty silt loams was 0.143 inches per inch. This is much lower than the mean value of 0.198 inches per inch for silt loams from East Tennessee. There were great variations in the bulk densities, amounts of chert, bulk densities of the chert, and available water holding capacities of these soils.

Available water holding capacity and water held at the various tensions are useful in determining irrigation needs and moisture management of soils. When moisture in two different soils is at the same tension, then the next increment of moisture in both soils is equally available to

Table S. A grouping of soils according to similarity in profile characteristics

• Soil moisture data for these series are included in this report.

¹ Soil drainage: $1 \equiv$ poorly drained; $2 \equiv$ somewhat poorly drained; $3 \equiv$ moderately well drained;

 $4 =$ well drained; $5 =$ somewhat excessively drained; $6 =$ excessively drained.

² Soil Series in parenthesis have been dropped in favor of the preceding soil series name. e.g. Hamblen has been dropped in favor of Lindside.

 $\overline{31}$

Table 5 (Continued). A grouping of soils according to similarity in profile characteristics

Poorly drained soils with fragipans

• Soil moisture data for these series are included in this report.

¹Soil drainage: $1 \equiv$ poorly drained; $2 \equiv$ somewhat poorly drained; $3 \equiv$ moderately well drained;

 $4 =$ well drained; $5 =$ somewhat excessively drained; $6 =$ excessively drained.

²² Soil Series in parenthesis have been dropped in favor of the preceding soil series name, e.g. Hamblen has been dropped in favor of Lindside.

loamy with fragipan thin loess over limestone Sango Sango

Table 5 (Continued). A grouping of soils according to similarity in profile characteristics

* Soil moisture data for these series are included in this report.

¹ Soil drainage: $1 \equiv$ poorly drained; $2 \equiv$ somewhat poorly drained; $3 \equiv$ moderately well drained;

 $4 =$ well drained; $5 =$ somewhat excessively drained; $6 =$ excessively drained.

⁰⁰ ² Soil Series in parenthesis have been dropped in favor of the preceding soil series name, e.g. Hamblen has been dropped in favor of Lindside.

Table 5 (Continued). A grouping of soils according to similarity in profile characteristics

~ 'Soil Series in parenthesis have been dropped in favor of the preceding soil series name, e.g. Hamblen has been dropped in favor of Lindside.

Table 6. Correlation coefficients between soil horizon permeability '"in inches per hour and soil horizon aeration porosity in percent

•• Significant at the .01 level of probability.

(Continued from page 30)

plants. The main difference is the amount of moisture held at the tension in question.

For example, assume that the soil moisture tension should not exceed 2 atmospheres for the best production of a particular crop and the same crop is located on a Congaree fine sandy loam and a Crossville loam. Data in Table 1 indicate that the Congaree (Lab. No. 166) should be irrigated when the surface soil moisture content decreases to 19.5% while the Crossville (Lab. No. 257) should be irrigated when the soil moisture decreases to 14.2% .

Water held at any tension may be converted from weight percent to volume percent by multiplying by the bulk density._ Available water holding capacities based on results from sieved samples equilibrated at 1/3 and 15 atmospheres tension of each soil for 1-,2-, and 3-foot depths are shown in Tables 9, 10, and 11.

Variations in the moisture characteristics within a soil series may seem large. However, since land use and cultural treatment of the soils of a particular series may have varied, differences in moisture characteristics are to be expected. Each profile is an individual, similar in many respects to other profiles of the same series but differing somewhat in properties.

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Table 7. Selected physical properties of eight cherty soil samples

* ch = cherty; sil = silt loam; c = clay.

 $\overset{\bullet\bullet}{\bullet}$, $\overset{\bullet}{\bullet}$ Determined from a 12" x 12" x 6" sample containing soil and chert.

 39 "

the Table 8. Location, land use, erosion, slope and available water holding capacity of eight cherty soil samples

Table 9. Location, land use, erosion, slope and available water holding capacity¹ of 78 East Tennessee soils

¹ Calculations based on $\frac{1}{3}$ and 15 atmosphere measurements on sieved samples.

 $+1$

>l>- **Table 9 (Continued). Location, land use, erosion, slope and available water** I:-:> **holding capacityl of 78 East Tennessee soils**

 \overrightarrow{c} ¹Calculations based on $\frac{1}{3}$ and 15 atmosphere measurements on sieved samples.

Table 10. Location, land use, erosion, slope, and available water holding capacity¹ of 27 Middle Tennessee soils

¹ Calculations based on $\frac{1}{3}$ and 15 atmosphere measurements on sieved samples.

~

Table 11. Location, land use, erosion, slope, and available water holding capacity¹ of 24 West Tennessee soils

¹ Calculations based on $\frac{1}{3}$ and 15 atmosphere measurements on sieved samples.

~

SUMMARY

SOME physical properties of many Tennessee soils are presented. Relationships between water storage and texture are pointed out.

As clay content increased, the available water holding capacity decreased but the decrease was not proportionate to the amount of clay. As sand increased, the moisture storage capacity decreased.

The available water holding capacity increases with silt and very fine sand content, and soils high in silt and very fine sand have the highest available water holding capacity.

Available water holding capacities of cherty soils are inclined to be low.

A relationship between permeability and aeration porosity is indicated.

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