

## Let Plants Tell you What's Wrong

Nutrient deficiencies can crop up at any time, but during Spring – when plants are at their most vigorous – the symptoms are more likely to show. This also gives you the best chance to work out what is going on.

Nutrient levels in the soil can vary from one season to the next, but usually not that much. On the other hand, nutrients in plant tissue can change dramatically, so if deficiency symptoms show up, this is a good opportunity to listen to what the plants are trying to tell you – and act!

The first step is to test the troubled tissue – collect leaves that are showing symptoms (these will show the deficiency most clearly), but remember that a tissue test can only tell what is wrong!

Too many people try to work out how much fertiliser to apply on the basis of a tissue test alone. The test results are given in either percentages or 'parts per million', but they do not say percent of what or parts out of how many million. For example, if the phosphorus result was 0.5%, but needed to be 0.7%, how many kilograms of fertiliser will make up the missing 0.2%? To answer this you would need to know how many kilos/ha of plants were in the paddock when the sample was collected and even then it would still be a bit of a 'stab-in-the-dark'.

The value in tissue testing is in quickly learning if you have a problem and what that problem is. It is especially valuable in dealing with Trace Elements. These nutrients are needed in only very small amounts and often it is only when plants are growing very strongly that they become deficient enough to show symptoms.

But remember that when you come to treating this deficiency, you are not trying to fix the underlying problem in the soil (you need a soil test to do that). Instead, you are trying to get your plants through with the least possible check to their growth and productivity.

For more information on improving your soil, contact Ted Mikhail at SWEP Analytical Laboratories on (03) 9701 6007.