



Soil Quality Indicators

Infiltration

Infiltration is the downward entry of water into the soil. The velocity at which water enters the soil is infiltration rate. Infiltration rate is typically expressed in inches per hour. Water from rainfall or irrigation must first enter the soil for it to be of value.

Factors Affecting

Inherent - Infiltration rate is dependent on soil texture (percentage of sand, silt, and clay) and clay mineralogy. Water moves more quickly through the large pore spaces in a sandy soil than it does through the small pores of a clayey soil, especially if the clay is compacted and has little or no structure or aggregation (see Table 1).

Depending on the amount and type of clay minerals, many clayey soils develop shrinkage cracks as they dry, creating a direct conduit for water to enter the soil. These clay soils have high infiltration capacities as water moves into the shrinkage cracks, although at other times, when cracks are not present, their infiltration rate is characteristically slow.

Dynamic - A reflection of climate and landscape position, as well as management practices and crop demand, existing soil water content affects the ability of the soil to pull additional water into it. Pores and cracks are generally open in a dry soil. Many of them are filled in by water or swelled shut as the soil becomes wet, so infiltration rate is generally highest when the soil is dry. As the soil becomes wet, the infiltration rate slows to the rate at which water moves through the most restrictive layer, such as a compacted layer or a layer of dense clay.

Infiltration is affected by crop and land management practices that affect surface crusting, compaction, and soil organic matter. Without the protective benefits of vegetative or residue cover, bare soil is subjected to the direct impact and erosive forces of raindrops that dislodge soil particles. Dislodged soil particles fill in and block surface pores, contributing to the development of surface crusts that restrict water movement into the soil.

Compaction results from livestock and equipment traffic, especially on wet soils, and continuous plowing to the



A one inch layer of water is added to a six inch diameter ring to measure infiltration rate.

same depth, e.g. the creation of a plow pan below the tillage depth. Compacted or impervious soil layers have reduced pore space and restricted water movement through the soil profile.

Soil organic matter affects infiltration through its positive affect on the development of stable soil aggregates, or crumbs. Highly aggregated soil has increased pore space and infiltration. Soils high in organic matter also provide good habitat for soil biota, such as earthworms, that through their burrowing activities, increase pore space and create continuous pores linking surface to subsurface soil layers.

Management that reduces soil cover, disrupts continuous pore space, compacts soil, or reduces soil organic matter negatively impacts infiltration. Since tillage negatively affects all of these properties, it plays an important role in a soil's infiltration rate.

Table 1. Steady infiltration rates for general soil texture groups in very deeply wetted soil. (Hillel, D. 1982. Introduction to soil physics. Academic Press, San Diego, CA)

Soil Type	Steady Infiltration Rate (in/hr)
Sands	> 0.8
Loams	0.2 - 0.4
Clays	0.04 - 0.2

Relationship to Soil Function

Infiltration is an indicator of the soil's ability to allow water movement into and through the soil profile. Soil temporarily stores water, making it available for root uptake, plant growth and habitat for soil organisms.

Problems with Poor Function

When water is supplied at a rate that exceeds the soil's infiltration capacity, it moves downslope as runoff on sloping land or ponds on the surface of level land. When runoff occurs on bare or poorly vegetated soil, erosion takes place. Runoff carries nutrients, chemicals, and soil with it, resulting in decreased soil productivity, off-site sedimentation of water bodies and diminished water quality. Sedimentation decreases storage capacity of reservoirs and streams and can lead to flooding.

Restricted infiltration and ponding of water on the soil surface results in poor soil aeration, which leads to poor root function and plant growth, as well as reduced nutrient availability and cycling by soil organisms. Ponding and soil saturation decreases soil strength, destroys soil structure, increases detachment of soil particles, and makes soil more erodible. On the soil surface rather than in the soil profile, ponded water is subject to increased evaporation, which leads to decreased water available for plant growth.

A high infiltration rate is generally desirable for plant growth and the environment. In some cases, soils that have unrestricted water movement through their profile can contribute to environmental concerns if misapplied nutrients and chemicals reach groundwater and surface water resources via subsurface flow.

Conservation practices that lead to poor infiltration include:

- Incorporating, burning, or harvesting crop residues leaving soil bare and susceptible to erosion,
- Tillage methods and soil disturbance activities that disrupt surface connected pores and prevent accumulation of soil organic matter, and
- Equipment and livestock traffic, especially on wet soils, that cause compaction and reduced porosity.

Improving Infiltration

Several conservation practices help maintain or improve water infiltration into soil by increasing vegetative cover, managing crop residues, and increasing soil organic matter. Generally, these practices minimize soil disturbance and compaction, protect soil from erosion, and encourage the development of good soil structure and continuous pore

space. As a short-term solution to poor infiltration, surface crusts can be disrupted with a rotary hoe or row cultivator and plow plans or other compacted layers can be broken using deep tillage.

Long-term solutions for maintaining or improving infiltration include practices that increase soil organic matter and aggregation, and reduce soil disturbance and compaction. High residue crops, such as corn and small grains, perennial sod, and cover crops protect the soil surface from erosion and increase soil organic matter when reduced tillage methods that maintain surface cover are used to plant the following crop. Application of animal manure also helps to increase soil organic matter. Increased organic matter results in increased aggregation and improved soil structure leading to improved infiltration rates. Conservation tillage, reduced soil disturbance, and reducing the number of trips across a field necessary to produce a crop help leave continuous pore spaces intact and minimize the opportunity for soil compaction.

Conservation practices resulting in infiltration rates favorable to soil function include:

- Conservation Crop Rotation
- Cover Crop
- Prescribed Grazing
- Residue and Tillage Management
- Waste Utilization

Measuring Infiltration

The Single Ring (Flooded/Ponded) Infiltrometer Method is described in the Soil Quality Test Kit Guide, Section I, Chapter 3, pp. 7 - 8. See Section II, Chapter 2, pp. 55 - 56 for interpretation of results.

Reference: Lowery B, Hickey WJ, Arshad MA, and Lal R. 1996. Soil water parameters and soil quality. In: Doran JW, Jones AJ, editors. Methods for assessing soil quality. Madison, WI. p 143-55.

Specialized equipment, shortcuts, tips:

To accurately assess infiltration and compare rates for different soils, the soils should be at similar moisture content when taking the measurement. It is recommended that measurements be taken at field capacity, defined as the water content of the soil root zone at which drainage (by gravity) becomes negligible. If the soil is already saturated, infiltration will not occur; wait for one or two days to allow for drying to measure infiltration rate.

Time needed: 60 minutes or more depending on soil conditions