Available online at
http://currentagriculturetrends.vitalbiotech.org/

ISSN (E): 2583 – 1933

Curr. Agri.Tren.:e- Newsletter, (2026) *5*(4), 23-25

Current Agriculture Trends: e-Newsletter

Article ID: 611

Importance of Micronutrients in Soil for Sustainable Crop Production

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Article History
Received: 1.4.2026
Revised: 5.4.2026
Accepted: 10.4.2026

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INTRODUCTION

Soil fertility is governed not only by the availability of primary macronutrients such as nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K), but also by micronutrients, which are equally essential for plant growth and development. Although required in trace amounts, micronutrients perform indispensable functions in plant physiological and biochemical processes, including enzyme activation, photosynthesis, respiration, and hormone regulation. In recent decades, the intensification of agriculture, coupled with imbalanced fertilizer use and declining organic matter, has led to widespread micronutrient deficiencies, emerging as a major constraint to crop productivity and soil health (Marschner, 2012). This issue is particularly pronounced in intensively cultivated regions where continuous cropping without adequate nutrient replenishment has depleted essential micronutrient reserves (Alloway, 2008).

2. Essential Micronutrients and Their Functions

Micronutrients such as zinc (Zn), iron (Fe), manganese (Mn), copper (Cu), boron (B), molybdenum (Mo), and chlorine (Cl) play vital roles in plant growth and metabolic activities. Zinc is essential for enzyme activation, protein synthesis, and the production of growth hormones such as auxins; its deficiency results in stunted growth and chlorosis (Alloway, 2008). Iron is crucial for chlorophyll synthesis and plays a significant role in respiration and photosynthesis, with deficiency leading to characteristic iron chlorosis (Marschner, 2012). Manganese acts as an activator of enzymes involved in photosynthesis and is important for nitrogen metabolism, while copper contributes to lignin synthesis, structural integrity, and reproductive development. Boron is essential for cell wall formation, pollen germination, and fruit development, and its deficiency adversely affects flowering and seed set. Molybdenum is required for nitrogen fixation and nitrate reduction processes, particularly in leguminous crops, whereas chlorine is involved in maintaining osmotic balance and ionic regulation within plant cells (Rengel, 2015). Together, these micronutrients ensure proper plant growth, development, and productivity.

3. Role of Micronutrients in Soil Health

Micronutrients are equally important for maintaining soil health, as they play a significant role in soil biological processes and nutrient cycling. They enhance microbial activity, which is essential for the decomposition of organic matter and the release of nutrients in plant-available forms. Micronutrients also support various enzyme systems within the soil, thereby improving nutrient use efficiency and maintaining soil fertility balance (Rattan Lal, 2020). An adequate supply of micronutrients ensures proper functioning of soil microorganisms, which are critical for sustaining soil productivity. Conversely, deficiencies or imbalances can disrupt microbial processes, reduce nutrient availability, and ultimately lead to a decline in crop yields and soil quality (Tisdale et al., 2013).

4. Factors Affecting Micronutrient Availability

The availability of micronutrients in soil is influenced by a complex interaction of physical, chemical, and biological factors. Soil pH is one of the most important determinants, as high pH conditions (alkaline soils) significantly reduce the availability of micronutrients such as zinc, iron, and manganese due to precipitation and reduced solubility (Lindsay, 1979). Organic matter plays a crucial role in enhancing micronutrient availability by forming chelates that keep nutrients in soluble forms accessible to plants. Soil texture also affects micronutrient status, with sandy soils being more prone to deficiencies due to low nutrient-holding capacity. Additionally, soil moisture and aeration influence nutrient mobility and uptake, while intensive cropping systems without adequate nutrient replenishment accelerate micronutrient depletion (Shukla & Behera, 2014). Understanding these factors is essential for effective nutrient management.

5. Micronutrient Deficiencies in Indian Soils

Micronutrient deficiencies have become a widespread problem in Indian soils, primarily due to intensive agricultural practices, excessive use of macronutrient fertilizers, and inadequate application of organic amendments. Among the micronutrients, zinc and iron deficiencies are the most prevalent, significantly affecting crop productivity and nutritional quality. According to the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, approximately 40–50% of Indian soils are deficient in zinc, highlighting the severity of the issue. Such deficiencies not only reduce crop yields but also impact human nutrition through the food chain, contributing to hidden hunger (Singh, 2009). Addressing micronutrient deficiencies is therefore critical for both agricultural sustainability and nutritional security in India.

6. Management of Micronutrients

Effective management of micronutrients is essential to restore soil fertility and improve crop productivity. Soil application of micronutrient fertilizers such as zinc sulphate, ferrous sulphate, and borax is a common practice, typically guided by soil testing to ensure appropriate dosage and avoid toxicity. Foliar application is another efficient method for the rapid correction of micronutrient deficiencies, particularly during critical growth stages (Alloway, 2008). The use of organic sources such as compost, farmyard manure (FYM), and green manures not only supplies micronutrients but also improves their availability by enhancing soil organic matter content. Integrated nutrient management (INM), which combines organic and inorganic nutrient sources, is widely recognized as an effective strategy for maintaining soil health and ensuring balanced nutrient supply (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2019). Such approaches contribute to sustainable and resilient agricultural systems.

7. Role in Sustainable Agriculture

Micronutrients play a pivotal role in sustainable agriculture by improving crop yield, quality, and resilience to environmental stresses. Adequate micronutrient supply enhances plant resistance to pests and diseases,

improves nutrient use efficiency, and ensures better crop performance under varying climatic conditions. Balanced nutrient management, including both macro and micronutrients, is essential for maintaining long-term soil fertility and productivity. International organizations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization emphasize that sustainable agricultural systems depend on integrated nutrient management practices that ensure the optimal availability of all essential nutrients. Therefore, micronutrient management is a key component of climate-smart and sustainable farming practices.

8. Challenges

Despite the recognized importance of micronutrients, several challenges limit their effective management and adoption at the farm level. Lack of awareness among farmers regarding micronutrient deficiencies and their management is a major constraint. Limited access to soil testing facilities further hampers the identification of nutrient deficiencies and appropriate corrective measures. Imbalanced fertilizer use, with a heavy reliance on NPK fertilizers, exacerbates micronutrient depletion in soils. Additionally, the relatively high cost of micronutrient fertilizers discourages their use by small and marginal farmers (Shukla & Behera, 2014). Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts in farmer education, policy support, and the promotion of cost-effective nutrient management strategies.

CONCLUSION

Micronutrients, though required in small quantities, are indispensable for sustaining plant growth, soil health, and agricultural productivity. Their role in critical physiological and biochemical processes underscores their importance in modern agriculture. The increasing prevalence of micronutrient deficiencies, particularly in intensively cultivated regions, poses a significant threat to sustainable crop production and soil fertility. Effective management through balanced fertilization, organic amendments, and integrated nutrient management is essential to address these challenges. Strengthening soil testing infrastructure, enhancing farmer awareness, and promoting sustainable nutrient management practices are crucial for ensuring long-term agricultural sustainability. Ultimately, maintaining an optimal balance of micronutrients is key to achieving improved crop productivity, environmental sustainability, and food security.

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