

Ohio's 'Unofficial' State Soil

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Ohio is called "The Buckeye State" and it is no coincidence that this publication was also named The Buckeye, in honor of our state tree, the Ohio Buckeye. The scarlet carnation is the state flower (some sites also list the white trillium as a "state flower") and a look at many state license plates will remind you that the state bird is the cardinal. Likewise, along the side of the road you may find a reminder of the reason the state mammal is the white-tailed deer—they thrive here just a little TOO well.

But did you know that Ohio's state reptile is the black racer, the state insect is the ladybug, the state fossil is the trilobite, and the state gemstone is flint? We even have a state beverage—tomato juice! Despite some serious efforts, Ohio still does not have an official state soil, although the Miamian soil series is considered our "unofficial" state soil.

Why should Ohio have a state soil? For one thing, Ohio's rich topsoil (4 to 12 inches deep) is one of the reasons Ohio is one of only five states that has about half of its land classified as "prime farmland", with over 15 million acres of land used for agriculture. There are over 70,000 farms in the state, and all but one percent of those are family-owned, but nearly 400 acres of Ohio farmland disappear every day. Some people envision farms as nothing but cornfields or soybeans; while those are the state's top crops, they are far from the only crops. Ohio farms produce more Swiss cheese than any other state, rank second in production of eggs, and fifth in the U.S. for production of flowers, with poinsettias being the state's primary floriculture crop.

Soil is so important to the economy of this state, it is not surprising to learn that the concept of soil management and conservation has a long history in Ohio. The first soil survey work was done in Montgomery County in 1900; 92 years later, soil surveys of the 88th county were completed. These surveys are performed by soil scientists, technically "pedologists", under the auspices of the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, ODNR's Division of Soil and Water Conservation, and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center.

Tim Gerber is administrator of Soil Inventory and Evaluation for the ODNR's Division of Soil and Water Conservation, based in Columbus. He explains how the idea of a state soil first evolved: "At a meeting of the Association of Ohio Pedologists, the 60 or so soil scientists in the state, it was decided that promoting the selection of a state soil would be a good way to promote soil resources," he says.

"Twelve soil series were nominated," Gerber recalls, "but by the process of elimination we decided on the Miamian soil series as the most representative. It was the first soil recognized in Ohio when the soils of Montgomery County were surveyed in 1900, although it was called just 'Miami' then. It is a well-drained soil that shows up on steeper slopes so we could talk about erosion; it is found on all kinds of landscapes and is really well suited for homesites and farmland, with both urban and agricultural uses."

"Miamian is not the most common soil in the state—no one soil series is dominant, and a couple have a higher percentage, but there is no more than about 5% of anyone soil. There is no one soil found in all 88 counties; the distribution has more of a geologic basis than a geographic one. Of Ohio's twelve soil regions, the largest is region four, and Miamian soil is the most common in that region. Just about every county in the state has a soil somewhat like it—well drained or moderately well drained, with erosion problems."

There are about 475 different types of soils in Ohio, and the Miamian soil series is about the fourth most common in the state, found mainly in 22 counties in the southwestern portion of the state. As an additional selling point, Miamian soil is featured on the Great Seal of Ohio, portrayed in the landscape scene. All of these reasons explain why Miamian soil is now considered the "unofficial" state soil of Ohio—but why isn't it the "official" state soil?

It was not through the lack of effort: former State Representative Jim Buchy (Greenville) introduced bills in the Ohio House in 1993, 1995 and 1997 "to designate the Miamian Soil Series as the official state soil." The wording of the proposed bill, section 5.072 of the Ohio Revised Code, read: "The Miamian soil series, consisting of deep, well-drained soils on upland glacial till plains, encompassing about 750,000 acres in Ohio, many considered prime farmland, being very productive and having high potential for most uses, named after native Americans in the region, and representing the diverse heritage of the state's soil resources, is hereby adopted as the official soil of the state." Unfortunately, the bill died each time without being voted upon.

After these failed attempts, Representatives Buchy and Robert Netzley (Laura) introduced a State Soil Bill, H.B. 183, on February 16, 1999. It had one hearing in the House Agriculture and Natural Resource Committee but it did not come to a vote.

Many people seemed to think that the bill was intended as a joke. Tim Gerber recalls, “Jim Buchy took a lot of ribbing for sponsoring state soil bills in the 1990s. Dave Barry's column (October 2002) entitled ‘Something is Rank About Way States Are Categorized’ is one of many written to make sport of state symbols, especially symbols of things considered by many to be common or worthless.”

In a fact sheet he devised to answer common questions about the soil bill, Gerber writes: “Why is it called the state ‘soil’? (Why not the state ‘dirt’?)” He goes on to note that “dirt” is a more generic term than “soil”, which describes the composition of the topsoil, subsoil and substratum to a depth of 60 inches, while people generally think of, ‘dirt’ as “earth material they have seen in garden supply stores and in piles at construction sites.”

It's not as if Ohio was the first state to select a “state soil”—Nebraska had that honor in 1979. Soil scientists in all 50 states have selected a representative soil for their state, and 15 states have an officially recognized state soil. The Wisconsin legislature confirmed the Antigo soil series as their official state soil in 1983. In Michigan, a state soil bill was enacted in 1990 establishing the Kalkaska soil series as the official state soil. Kentucky enacted a state soil bill in 1990 establishing Crider as its official state soil and recently West Virginia officially recognized Monongahela as its state soil. Illinois is represented by the Drummer soil series, Minnesota by the Lester soils, Iowa by the Tama soils, and Missouri by the Menfro soils.

Considering the importance of soil to Ohio's economy, it doesn't really seem far-fetched to go the extra step and make the Miamian soil series “official”. Apparently no one was laughing when the ladybug was chosen as the state insect and when tomato juice was given the “official” designation as the state beverage. Soil scientists such as Tim Gerber just want people to recognize the difference between a valuable resource such as Miamian soil and that bagged commodity commonly called “dirt”.

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SOURCES:

—Telephone interview with Tim Gerber, Administrator of Soil Inventory and Evaluation, ODNR - Div. of : Soil & Water Conservation, 4383 Fountain Square Drive, Building B-3, Columbus, OH 43224-1362, Tel: (614) 265-6680

—“Common questions about the State Soil Bill H.B. 183,” by Tim Gerber (based on information compiled by his department)

—“Soil Formation and Soil Classification,” “Soil Use and Management,” “What is Soil?” and “What is a Soil Survey?” from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service/Soils website, <http://soils.usda.gov/education>

—“History of State Soil Bills,” Ohio Department of Natural Resources website, www.ohiodnr.com/soilandwater/soilbill.com

—“Ohio Agriculture,” Ohio Department of Agriculture website, 2002, www.ohioaginfo.com/