

# **SOIL COLORS AND THEIR INTERPETATION APRIL 2015**

David Hammonds

Environmental Consultant

Florida Department of Health

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# OBJECTIVES

- Define and describe methodology for determination of soil color
- Describe proper use of Munsell color book
- Describe methodology for determination of soil color contrast

# NOTE

**Additional information on certain slides will be found in the “NOTES” section and will only be visible in the “normal” view in PowerPoint. See ## to designate these slides.**

# Required Methodology

United States Department of  
Agriculture  
Natural Resources Conservation  
Service  
(USDA NRCS)

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# USDA NRCS Notation

- Officially referenced by DOH regulations
- MUST be used for all OSTDS purposes when describing soils
- No other methodology can be accepted

# Methodology Describes:

- Soil Color
- Soil Texture (previous presentation)
- Soil Horizonation (layering of soils, previous presentation)
- Seasonal high water table indicators (upcoming presentations)

# Soil Color

- Color: A key property in soil interpretation
- Most evident (observable)
- Influenced by Organic Matter (OM) content and redoximorphic (redox) sensitive metals such as Iron (Fe) and Manganese (Mn)

# Munsell Color Charts

## Properly Coloring Soils

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# Munsell Coloring Information

- Current version is 2009
- Can use older books if they contain the requisite information and are like new
- Any page with missing, faded, cracked or discolored (dirty) chips must be replaced
- Using improper tools will result in wrong answers, possibly a system in violation of regulations

# Munsell Color Notation

Used to describe soil color for maximum accuracy and communication. ANY OTHER NOTATION CANNOT BE ACCEPTED.

- Three descriptive elements are used and are *always* written in the following specific order and manner
- **HUE VALUE/CHROMA**
- **5YR 4/6**

# Munsell Notation - Hue

- Basis spectral color such as red, yellow, yellow-red, purple, blue, green, green-yellow, etc.
- Munsell book normally has one hue per page, except for the Gley Charts (plus two other pages that we will not cover)

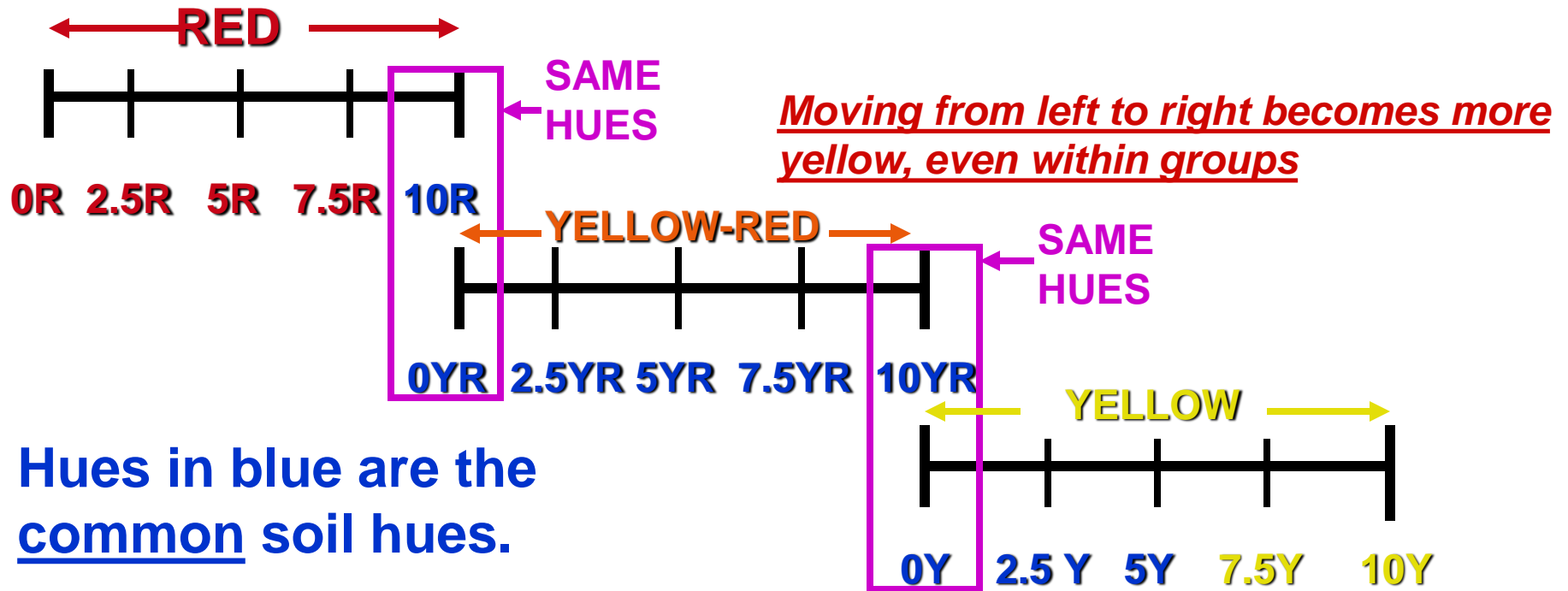
# HUE Symbols

- R = Red; YR = Yellow-Red; Y = Yellow, etc. (see Munsell book)
- The letter is preceded by numbers 0 to 10
- Within each letter range the Hue becomes more yellow and less red as the numbers increase

# Hues

- For example:
  - 5YR is more red (less yellow) than 7.5YR
  - 2.5Y is less yellow than 5Y
- Gley Charts include Neutral (N), Yellow (Y), Green (G), Blue (B), Purple (P), and combinations

# Hue - basis spectral color; wavelength



***Note increments of 2.5 between each consecutive hue (this is one unit of hue)***

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# Common Soil Hues

In order from most red to most yellow:

- 10R
- 2.5YR, 5YR, 7.5YR, 10YR
- 2.5Y, 5Y

# Munsell Notation-VALUE

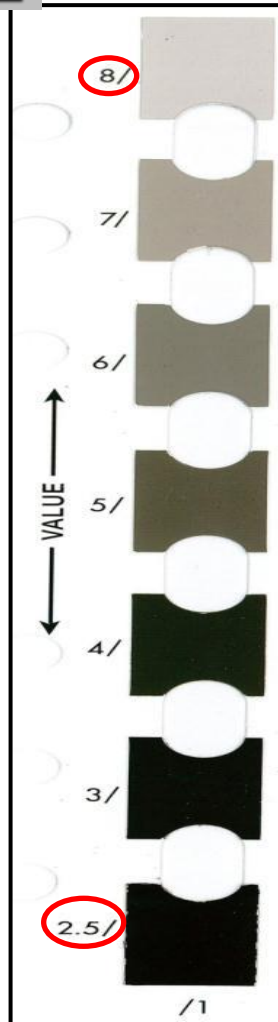
- Indicates the degree of lightness or darkness, or reflectance of an object viewed in daylight
- Scale is from 0 for the ideal black to 10 for the ideal white, in steps (units) that are visually equal
- Numbers are units of Value
- Full scale not generally used for soils



**PURE WHITE 10/0**

**GRAY 5/0**

**PURE BLACK 0/0**



**Value-Lightness** increases from black at the bottom of page, through the grays, to nearly white at the top of the page

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# Munsell Notation-Chroma

- The scale is from 0 - 8 on the Munsell Color Chart
- 0 indicates no strength of color (no color; gray) and 8 greatest strength (most color)
- Full scale not generally used for soils
- Numbers are units of Chroma

# Chroma

- Read from left (least color) to right (most color)
- *The color intensity or relative strength of color*, indicates the degree of departure from a gray of the same Value
- Color is from coloring agents like iron or manganese

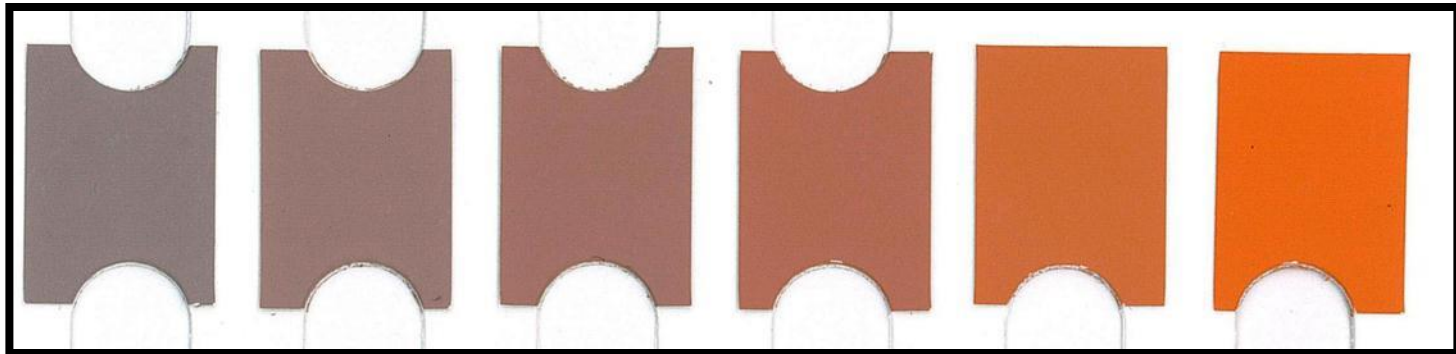
# Chroma – color intensity

“Neutral”  
Color

“Pure”  
Color



Increasing strength of color (at same Value)

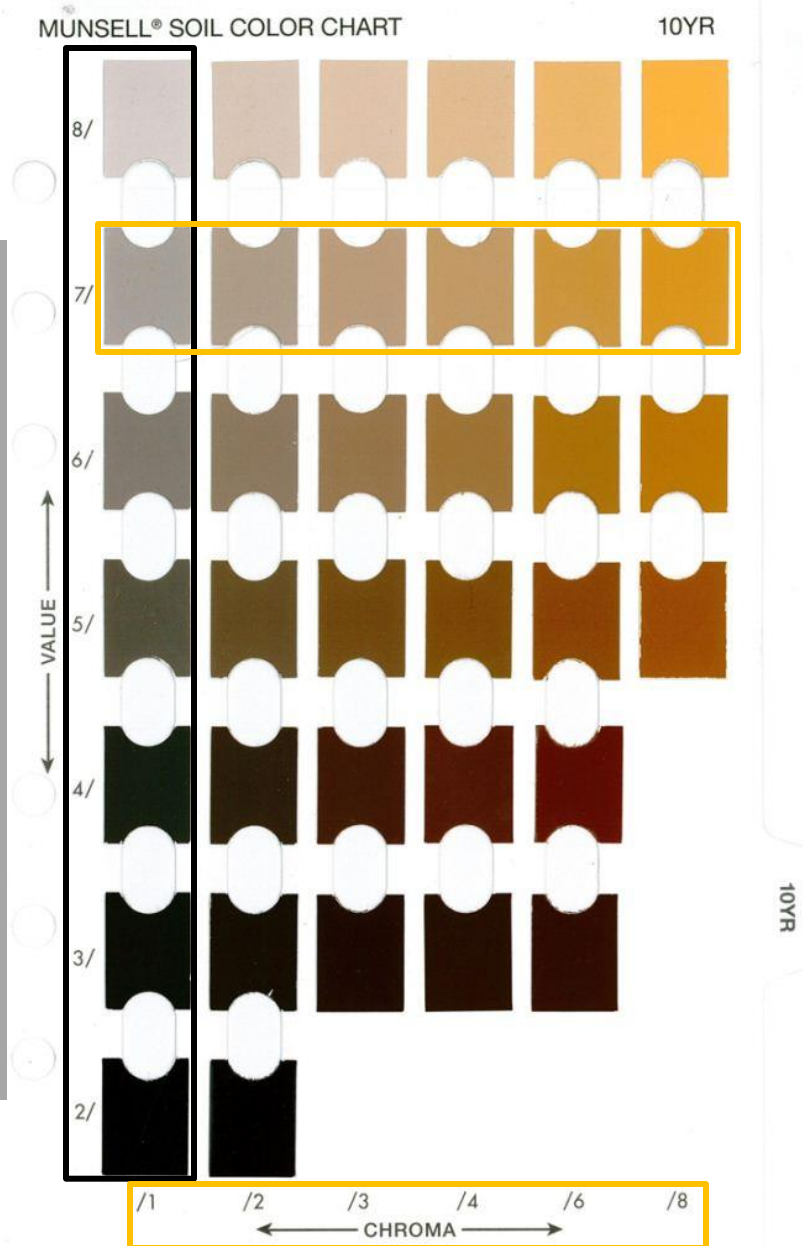


← Increasing grayness

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**Value -** measurement of soil organic matter (OM), the lightness or darkness of a color. Range is from 0 (pure black) to 10 (pure white).



**Chroma-** measurement of coloring agents like iron or manganese. Strength of color. Range is from 0 (no color) to 8 (most color).

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# Munsell Book Layout

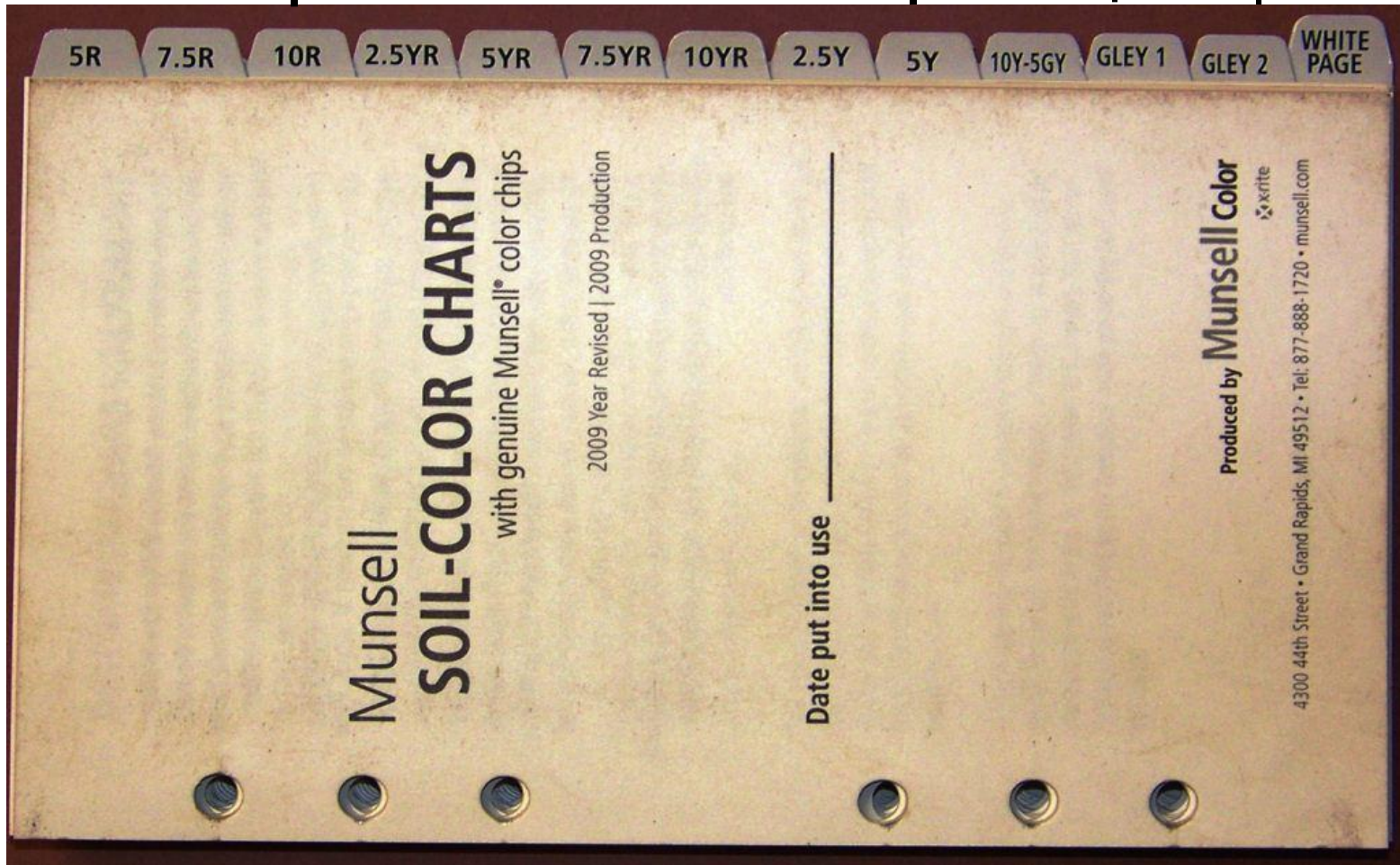
- Pages in Munsell Book are prearranged from most red through most yellow
- Gley Charts are normally found in back



##

Normal soil colors

Gley Charts



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# Munsell Book Use

- *Use the book properly – Pages must be usable (keep new Munsell in office for “master” comparison)*
- *Use book as it came from manufacturer*
- *Do not rearrange pages*
- *Must have clean chips, pages as they originally came, no faded chips*
- *Do not laminate chips, take pictures of the page for use, etc.*

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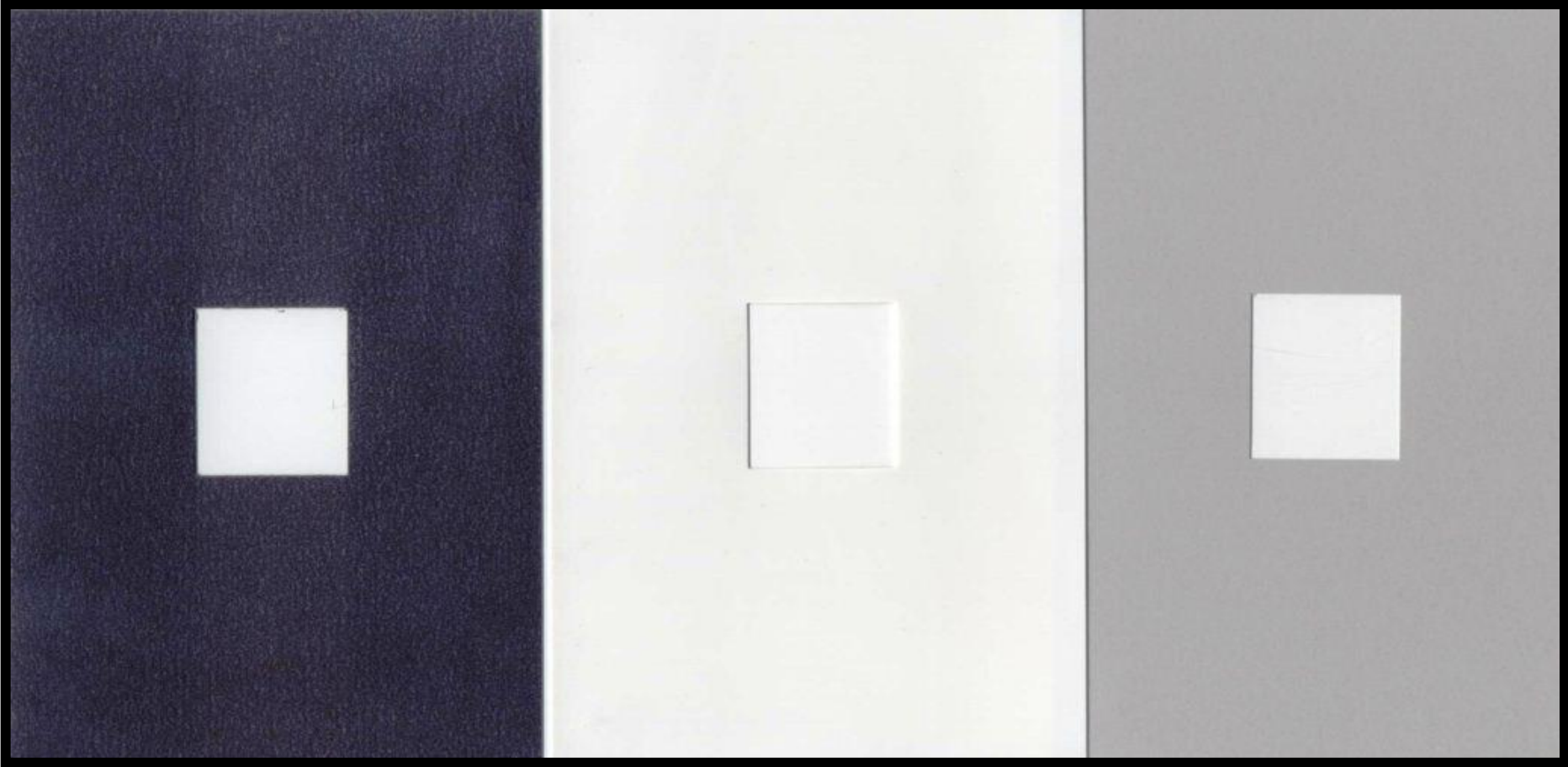
# Munsell Book Use

- Do not take too long to read the color
- Use the Chip Masks if necessary
- Chip masks facilitate color matching when there is difficulty in choosing a color

# Munsell Book Use-Chip Masks##

- Three masks, use mask closest in value to soil sample
- Black mask for black/very dark samples
- White mask for light colored samples
- Gray mask for all others

# CHIP MASKS



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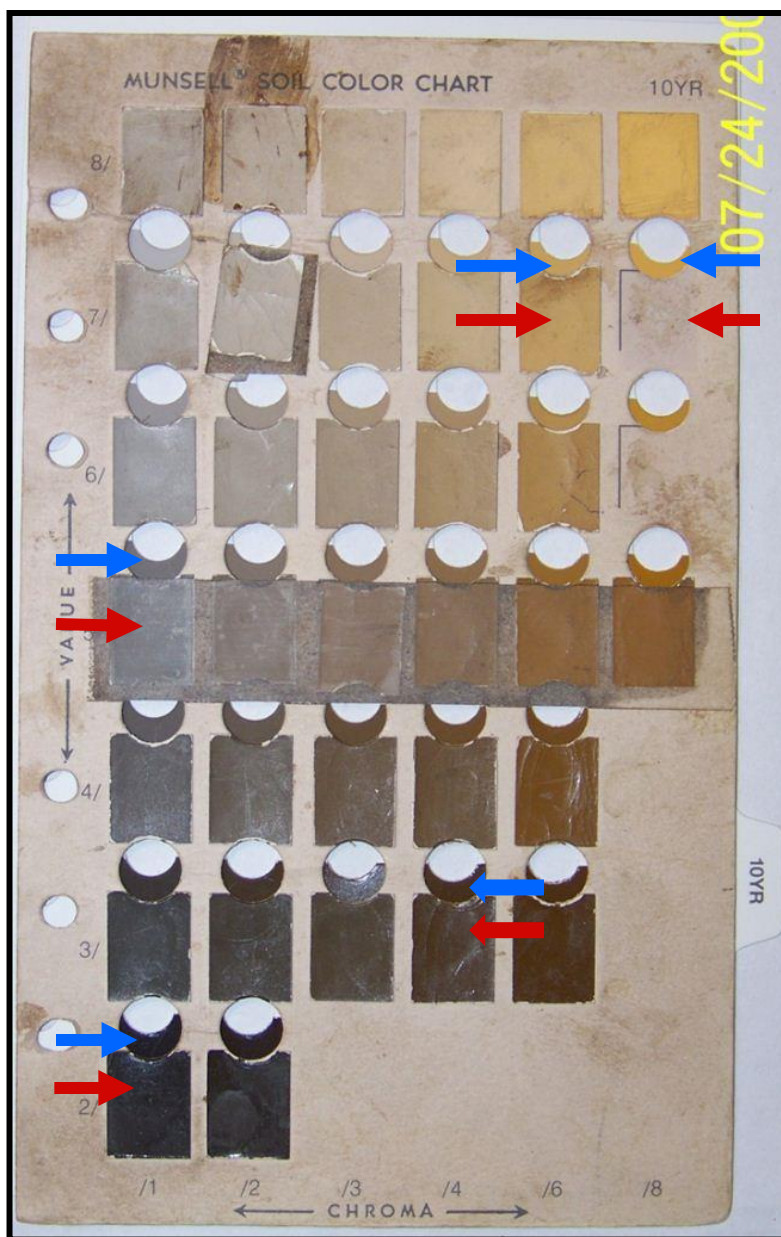


**Taped chips,**  
**missing**  
**chips,**  
**cracked**  
**chips,**  
**discolored**  
**(dirty/faded)**  
**chips.** Older  
page on left,  
new on  
right.

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Comparison of 2  
cards  
(**New** behind  
**old**. Observe  
differences in  
chip colors)

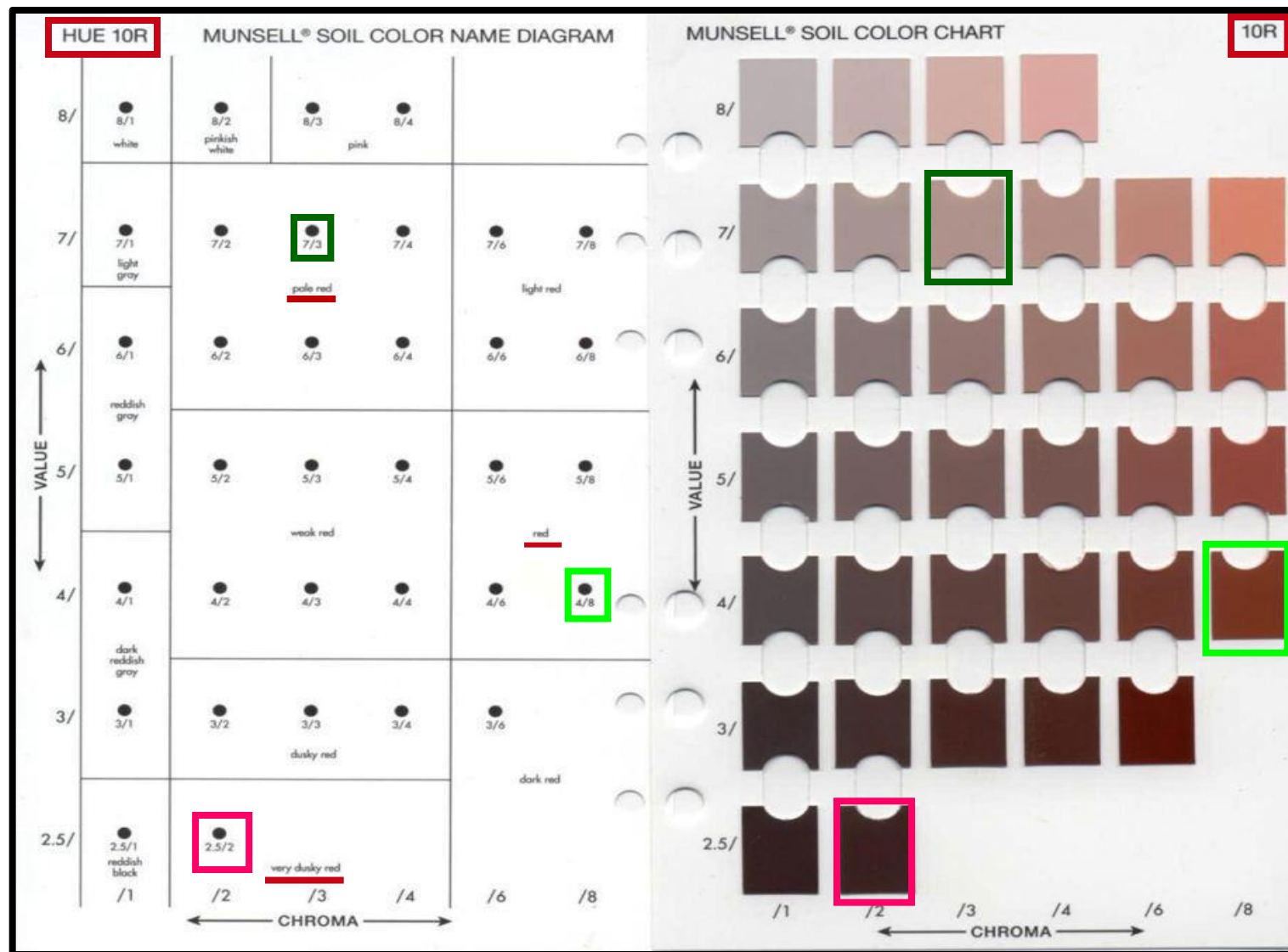
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# Correct Coloring Method

- Look to left side of Munsell book for soil color name diagram and match Hue Value/Chroma from right side
- See next slide for examples

# Soil Color Names



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# Colors BETWEEN Chroma Chips

- Colors exist between chroma chips
- They are noted differently than others
- If the chroma is between two chips, note the lower one (more gray) and add a “+” as a notation
- Do not round up or down



# Colors BETWEEN Chroma Chips

- Example: The soil sample has more chroma than 10YR 6/1 but not enough to be 10YR 6/2
- The proper notation would be 10YR 6/1+
- This will be discussed in more detail later

# QUESTIONS??

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# ***PROPER TECHNIQUE FOR DETERMINING SOIL COLORS***

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# Reading soil colors

- Optimum conditions
  - Natural light
  - Clear, sunny day
  - Midday
  - Light at right angles (no shadows on sample)
  - Soil is moist (not wet or dry)



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# Moist Soil

- *Does not glisten or have puddled water*
- *Doesn't darken when moisture added*
- *When texturing, the soil should be easily manipulated by your thumb and forefinger*
- In non-sandy soils, this could be compared to moist putty

# Correct Moisture Content



**DRY SOIL**

**Note higher value,  
lower chroma**



**MOIST SOIL**

**MUST USE  
THIS ONE**



**TOO WET**

**Note Glistening**

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# Correct Coloring Method

- Hold soil behind the hue card containing the color chips
- Never put soil on front of pages
- Find the closest match from all choices in the book, read Hue Value/Chroma notation
- **Don't just look on 10YR page!!!!**



***Sun over RT shoulder  
RT angle to page***

***NO Sunglasses!!!***

***Pages are  
UNALTERED/  
ORIGINAL/  
CLEAN***

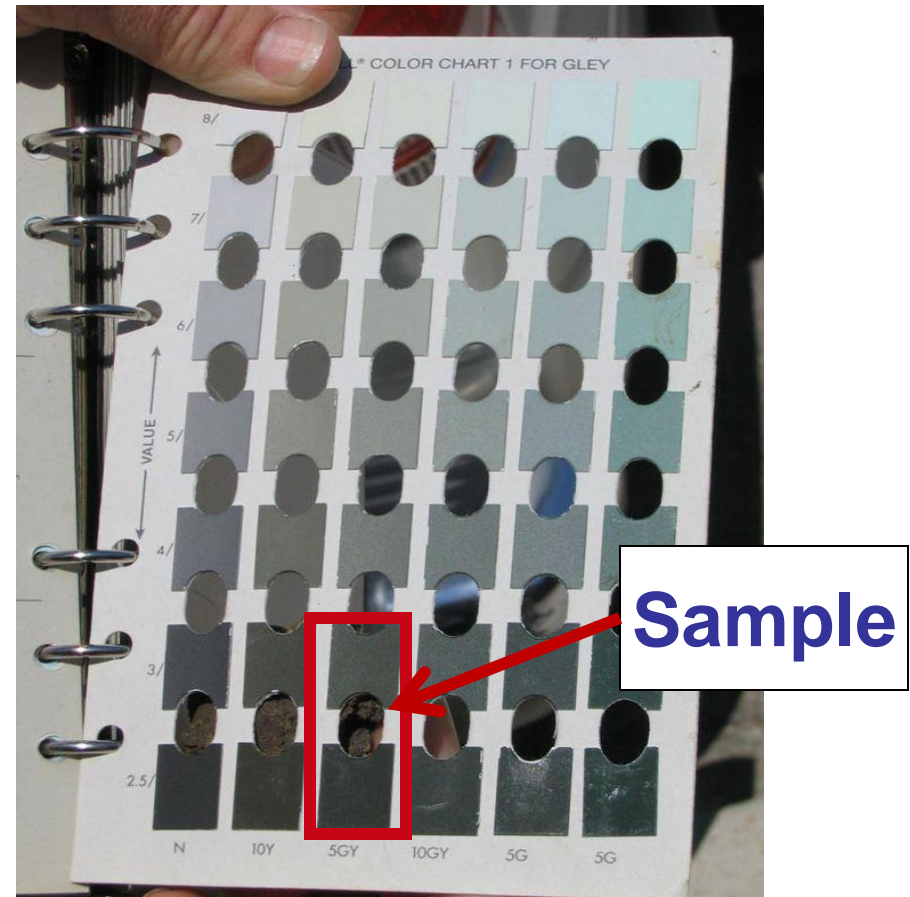
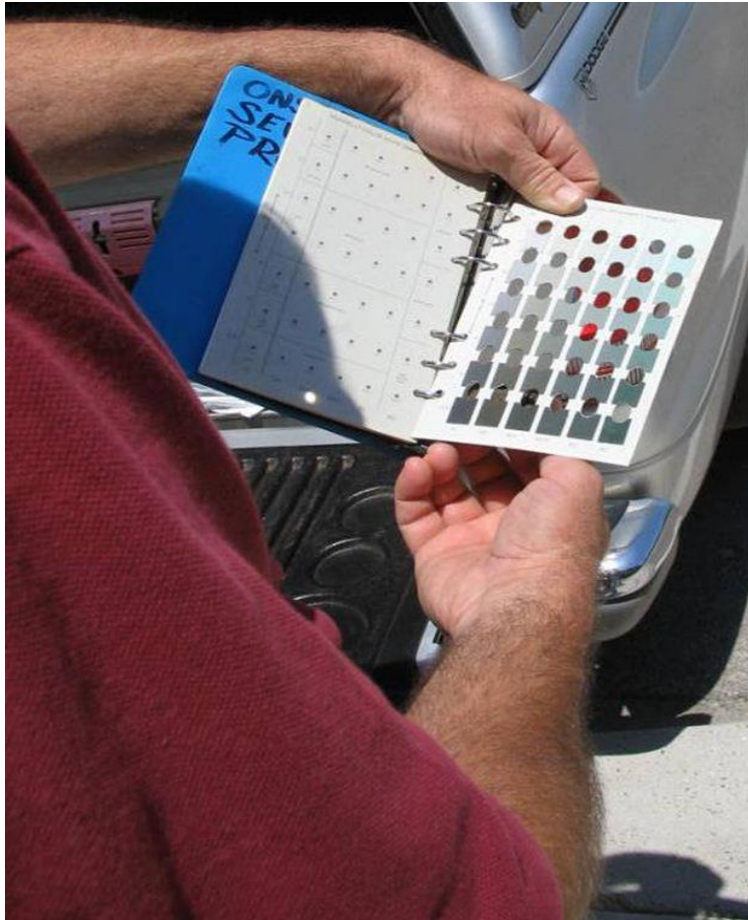
***Small/Moist sample BEHIND  
the hue card! NEVER  
ON THE PAGE!!***

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# Sample is behind the hue card



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# Incorrect Methodology



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# Low Chroma Colors

- Whenever the phrase “low chroma” is used it means that the chroma of the color is  $\leq 2$
- Translates to very little coloring agent (Fe or Mn), only darkness due to organic matter

# Low Chroma and Gley Colors

- Gley Chart colors are all low chroma colors
- Specific gley colors have meaning regarding the SHWT determination

# Gley Charts and Their Correct Use

*Different than all other pages*

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# GLEY CHARTS

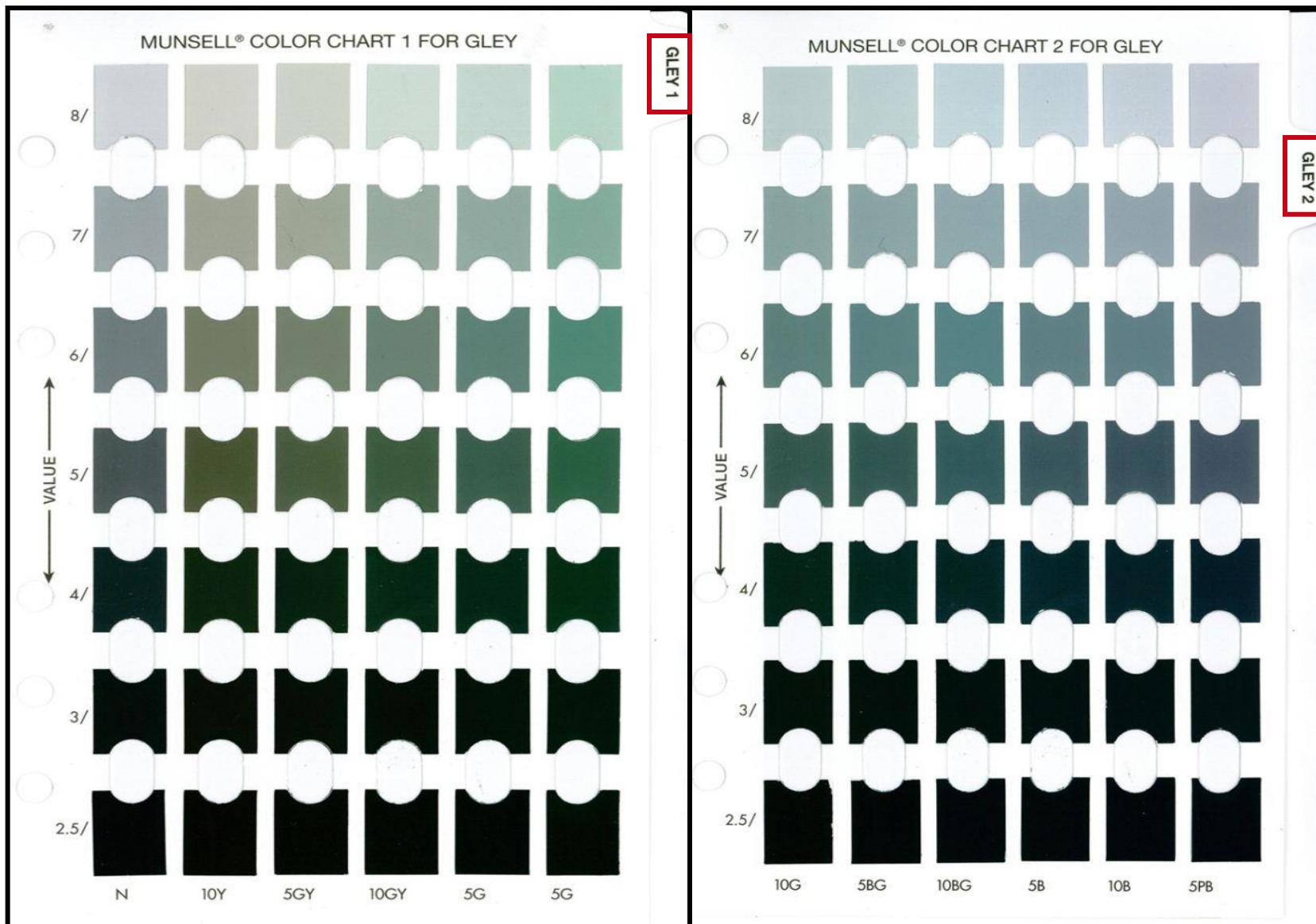
- Two supplemental charts containing grayish, bluish and greenish colors often found in very wet mineral soils are contained on these charts
- The charts also contain a Neutral Hue (labeled N) which means no chroma
- Soils with values  $\geq 4$  on these charts are very wet and indicate water (SHWT?)

# Gley Chart Colors

- Neutral (N)
- Yellow (Y)
- Green (G)
- Blue (B)
- Purple (P)
- Green-Yellow (GY)
- Blue-Green (BG)

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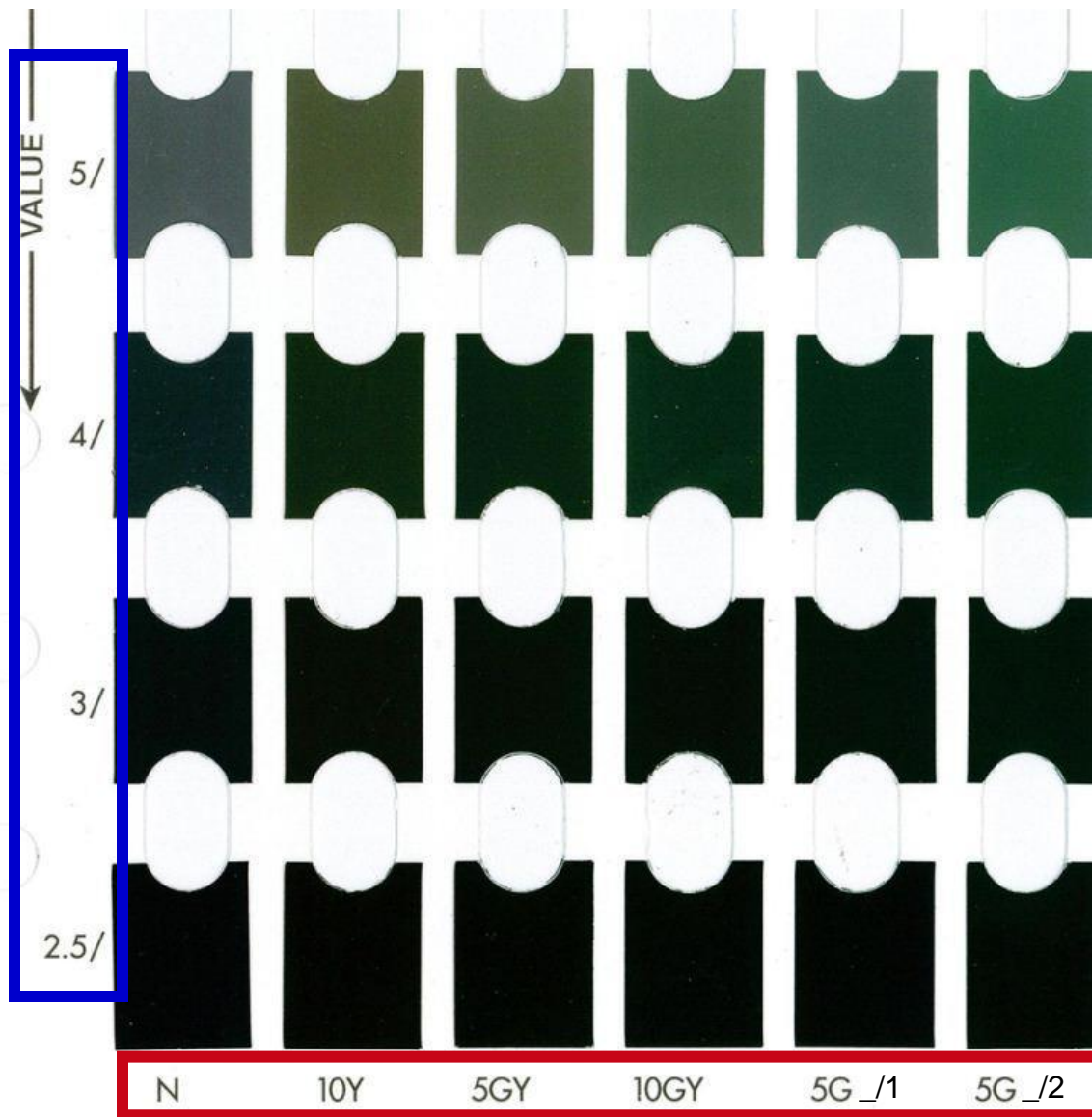
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# *The Gley Charts*

- Hues are found in each individual column at the bottom of the page
- Values are read like other charts
- Chromas not evident on color chips (with two possible exceptions depending on the version being used)

Values



Different  
Hues on  
bottom
























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# Chromas for Gley Charts

- Read chroma from the soil name diagram (left side) of the charts
- Chroma designation will be to the right of the forward slash like all other chromas

# Chroma read to right of forward slash

↓	4/	4/  	4/1 	4/1 	4/1 	4/1 	grayish green 4/2 
		dark gray	dark greenish gray				
	3/	3/  	3/1 	3/1 	3/1 	3/1 	very dark grayish green 3/2 
		very dark gray	very dark greenish gray				
	2.5/	2.5/  	2.5/1 	2.5/1 	2.5/1 	2.5/1  	2.5/2  
		black	greenish black				
	N		10Y	5GY	10GY	5G_/1	5G_/2

2009 Production

**NO CHROMA**

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# Gley Chart Chromas

- All chromas on Gley Charts are chroma 1, except for two hues:
- N (Neutral) having 0 (no) chroma (this is due to lack of iron giving any color)
- 5G \_/2

# ***Soil Color Contrast***

**Determining Differences between  
soil colors**

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# Compare Components Correctly

- Compare Hue to Hue-ignore value and chroma color components
- Compare Value to Value-ignore hue and chroma color components
- Compare Chroma to Chroma-ignore hue and value color components

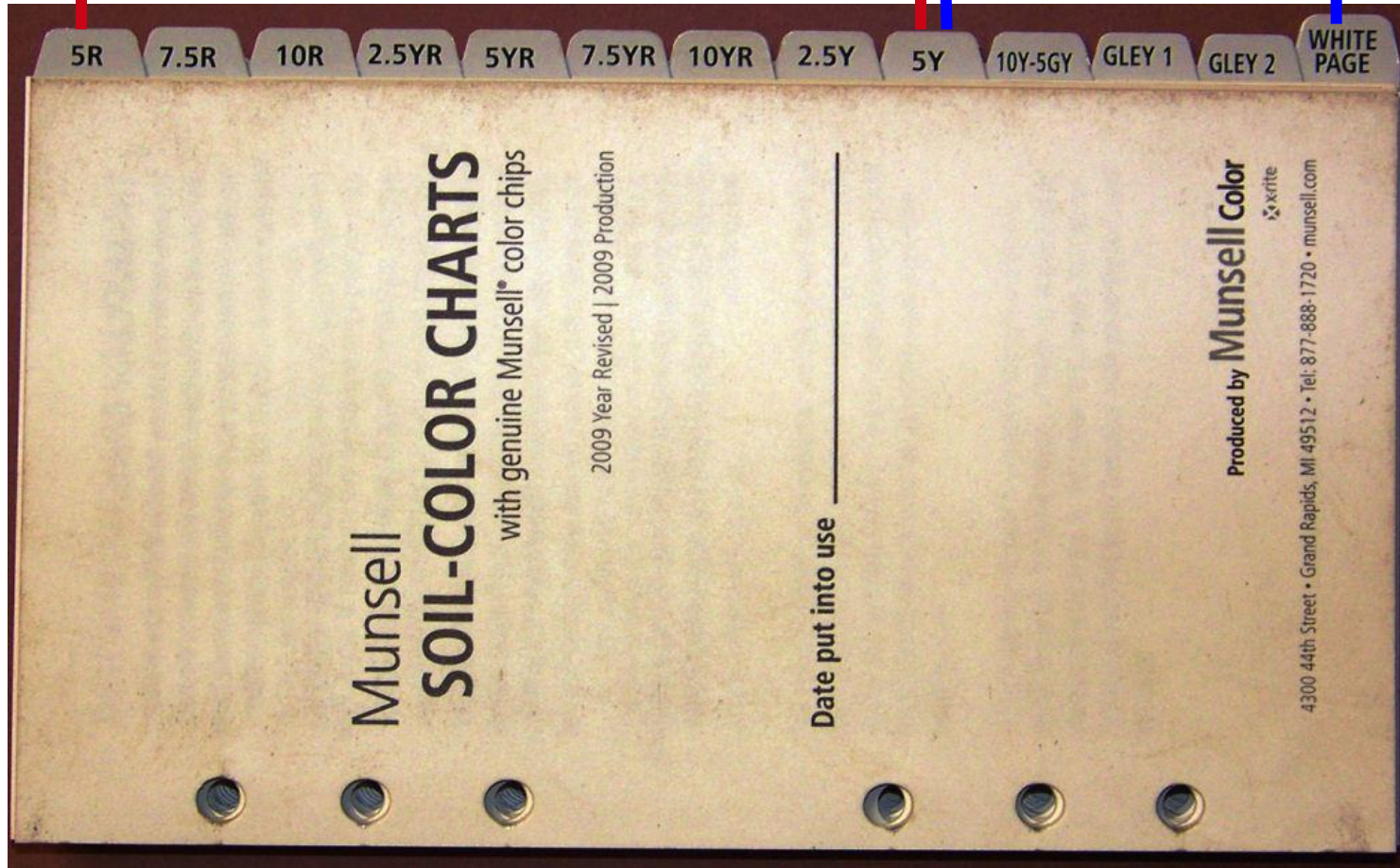
# Hue Difference

- First must determine the difference in the HUE of each color
- Use color wheel (later slide)
- Quick method for most colors is to count pages in accordance with following diagram. (Note:  $\Delta$  signifies “change in” and “h” signifies Hue; therefore  $\Delta h$  means change in Hue)



$\Delta h=1$  per page, count # of pages

$\Delta h \neq 1$  per page



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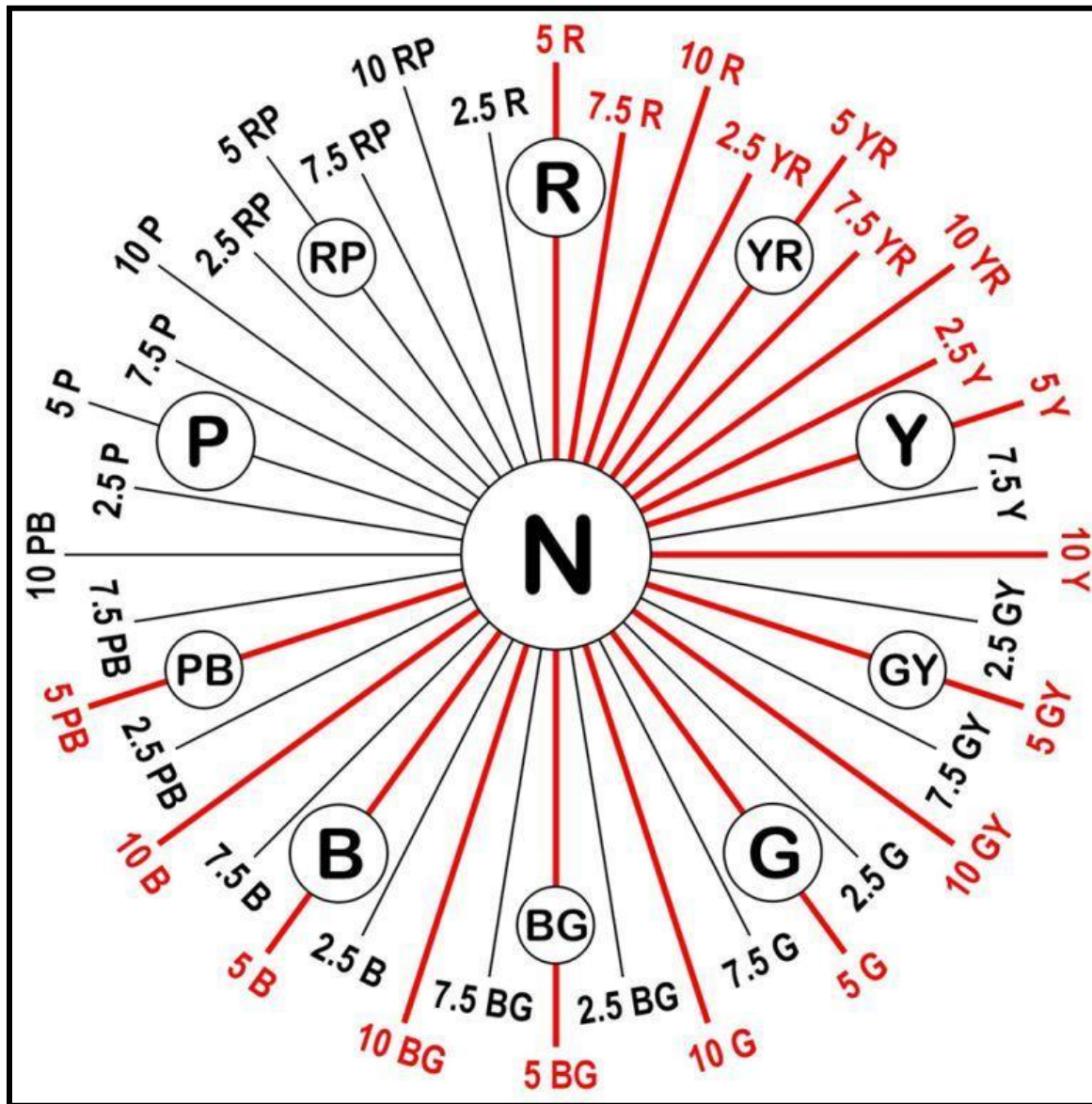
# Use of the Munsell Hue Circle ##

## USDA NRCS Technical Note 2

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# Munsell Hue Circle ##



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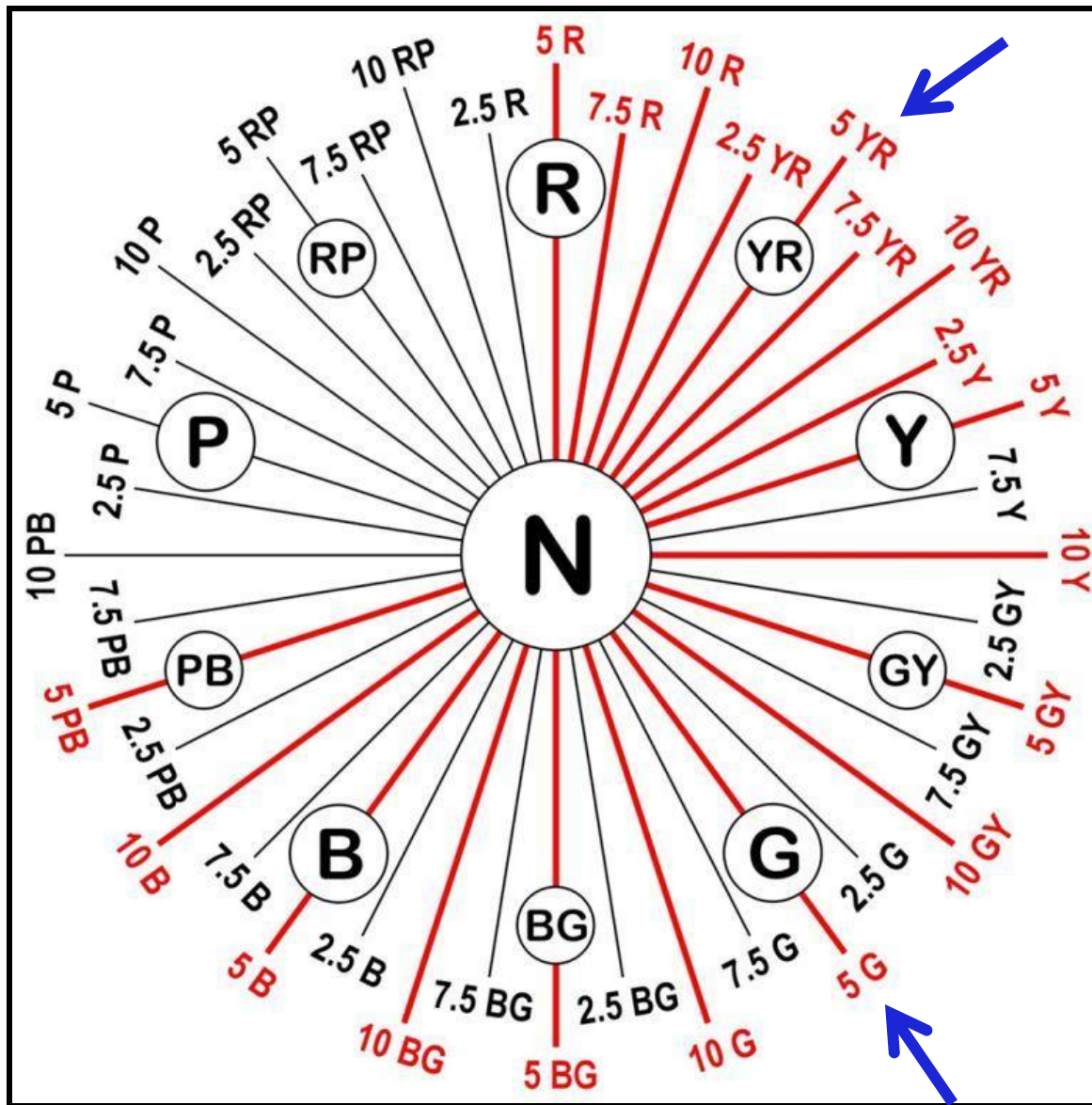
# To calculate Hue Change:

- Count the number of 2.5-unit intervals
- 2.5YR and 7.5YR differ by two 2.5-unit intervals ( $7.5 - 2.5 = 5$ , which is two 2.5-unit intervals), therefore  $\Delta h = 2$
- Hues of 5Y and 5GY differ by four 2.5-unit intervals, therefore  $\Delta h = 4$
- Could also just use the wheel

# Counting Hue Change

- Count the number of hues as you go **CLOCKWISE** on wheel
- Example: Difference between 5YR and 5G is a difference of 12 hue units
- Consider **ONLY** the Hue information, ignore value/chroma information





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# Hue change from Neutral

The Hue change from neutral to any other hue is a change of one unit of hue

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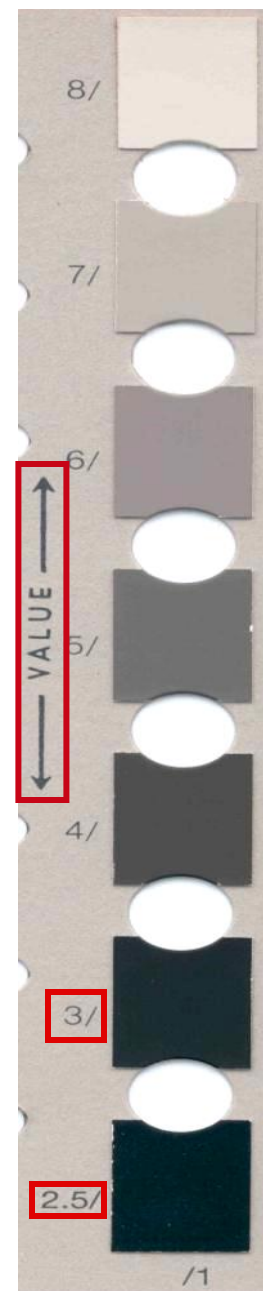
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# Units of Value Change

- Units of value range from 0 to 10
- Normally have one unit of change between each stated value, but there may be less
- Example:
- The difference in Value between a 10YR 5/1 and a 10YR 7/1 is 2 UNITS.  
(The difference between 5 and 7 is 2)



- Values can change by as little as 0.5 units
- Difference between a value of 2.5 and a value of 3 is 0.5 units (<1 unit of value change)
- If you were to count chips, the answer would appear to be 1, which would be wrong
- Don't count chips



***TO DETERMINE VALUE  
CHANGE, CALCULATE  
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE  
UNITS  
(Value of 2.5, 3, 4, etc.) –***

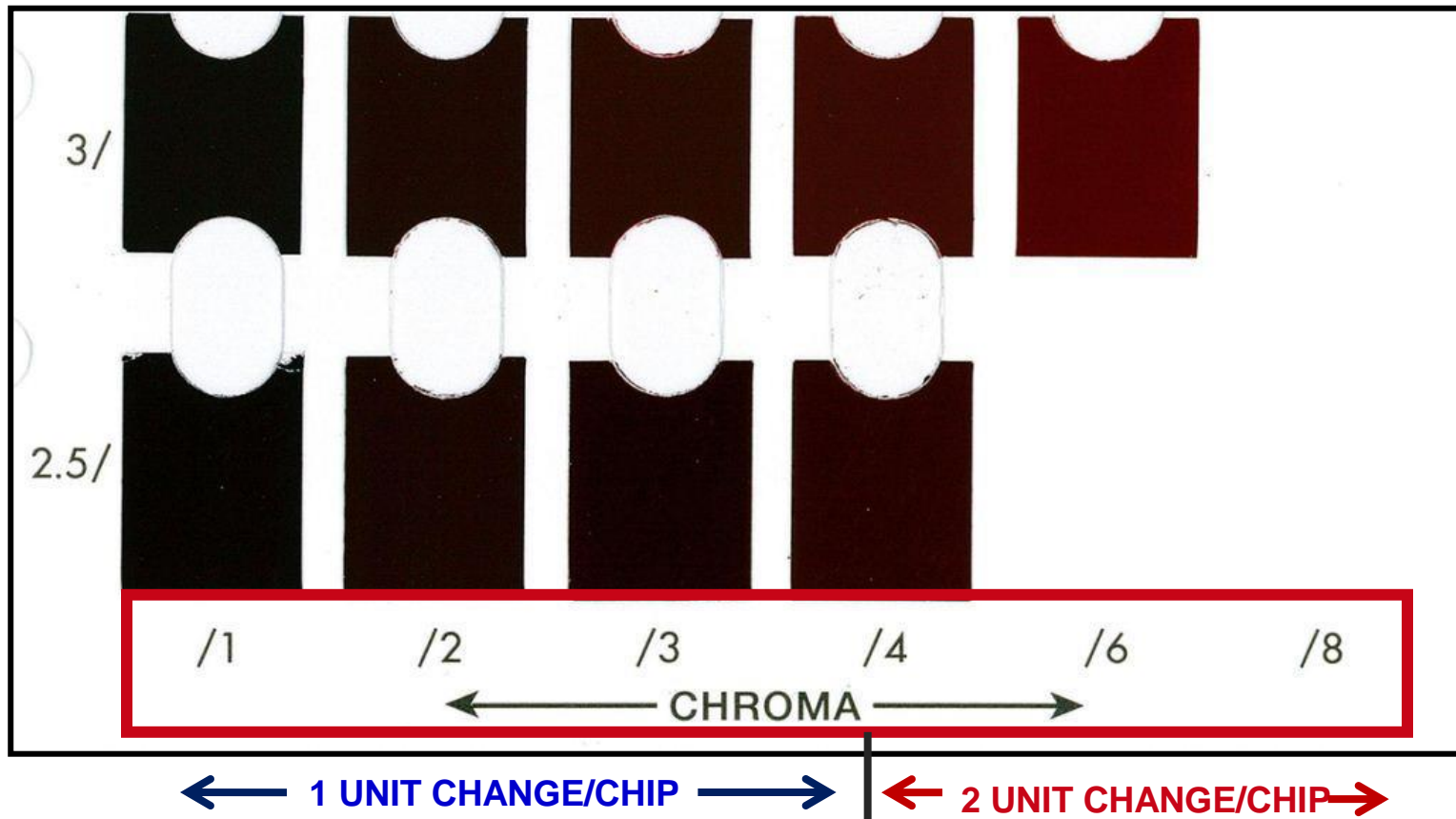
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# Units of Chroma Change

- Units for Chroma range from 0 to 8
- There is a one or two unit change between each chroma in the soil color book
- Exception would be if you fall between two chromas such as a chroma 2 and 2+ (as in stripped matrix)

# Units of Chroma Change



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# Units of Chroma Change

- The difference in Chroma between a 10YR 5/3 and a 10YR 5/6 is 3 units ( $6-3=3$ )
- Counting chips would lead to conclusion of a two chip difference which is the wrong answer
- Chroma change would be counted as 3
- *Do not count chips!!!*

***TO DETERMINE CHROMA  
CHANGE, CALCULATE  
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE  
UNITS  
(Chroma of 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) –***

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- When determining the soil color difference, *compare Value to Value and Chroma to Chroma*
- Change in hue does not affect the calculation of the difference between values or chromas, they are independent of each other
- Simply determine the value or chroma in each color and calculate the difference without regard to hue

# QUESTIONS?

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# Soil Color Contrast

Contrast refers to the degree of visual distinction between associated colors

**Faint** – contrasts that are evident only on close examination

**Distinct** -- contrasts that are readily seen but are only moderately expressed

**Prominent** -- contrasts that are strongly expressed

- Different people cannot uniformly and consistently judge these subjective criteria with no other guidelines
- An objective method is needed to judge the soil color contrast
- Use the USDS NRCS Soil Survey Technical Note No. 2, May 2002 entitled “Soil Color Contrast”

## Soil Survey Technical Note No. 2

**Soil Color Contrast****Purpose**

This technical note provides uniform definitions for color contrast terms among the *Soil Survey Manual* (Soil Survey Staff, 1993), the *Field Book for Describing and Sampling Soils* (Schoeneberger et al., 1998), and the *Field Indicators of Hydric Soils in the United States* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1998). It also describes a new procedure to determine the difference in hue between colors.

**Background**

In an effort to synchronize the definition among the *Soil Survey Manual*, the *Field Book for Describing and Sampling Soils*, and the *Field Indicators of Hydric Soils in the United States*, a provisional definition for color contrasts was field tested nationally in 1998. After the testing period, a call for final comments was requested regarding final adoption of the provisional definition. The definition and other items contained in this technical note are the result of these collaborations and deliberations.

**Introduction**

Color contrast is the degree of visual distinction that is evident between one soil color compared with another in close proximity. In this application it is a visual impression of the prominence between a minor color component (mottle or concentration) and an associated major color component (matrix). The *Soil Survey Manual* provides three categories of soil color contrast:

- 1) *faint* for contrasts that are evident only on close examination,
- 2) *distinct* for contrasts that are readily seen but are only moderately expressed, and
- 3) *prominent* for contrasts that are strongly expressed.

This technical note provides guidelines to help the soil scientist assign contrast terms consistently. Determining soil color contrast is not always simple. Prominent mottles are likely the first thing one notices when observing a freshly broken piece of soil fabric. However, if a fabric has several shades and less contrast, it takes time and concentration to fully record colors and color patterns. The contrast between two colors decreases with decreasing value and/or chroma, and it becomes faint if value is 3 or less and chroma is 2 or less, regardless of differences in hue. Furthermore, there can be a considerable amount of error in distinguishing and contrasting the colors of two features, depending on the water state; the quality of light; the time of day; roughness

May 2002

1

**Cover page**  
**See FDOH Soil**  
**Manual for entire**  
**technical note**

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## Definitions of soil color contrast terms

**Note:** If the mottle and matrix both have **values** of  $\leq 3$  and **chromas** of  $\leq 2$ , the color contrast is ***Faint***, regardless of the difference in hue.

**Faint** - Evident only on close examination. The contrast is faint if the:

- 1) difference in hue = 0, difference in value is  $\leq 2$ , and difference in chroma is  $\leq 1$ , or
- 2) difference in hue = 1, difference in value is  $\leq 1$ , and difference in chroma is  $\leq 1$ , or
- 3) difference in hue = 2, difference in value = 0, and difference in chroma = 0, or
- 4) difference in hue is  $\geq 3$  and both colors have values of  $\leq 3$  and chromas of  $\leq 2$ .

**Distinct** - Readily seen but contrast only moderately with the color to which compared. The contrast is distinct if the:

- 1) difference in hue = 0, and
  - a. difference in value is  $\leq 2$  and difference in chroma is  $>1$  to  $<4$ , or
  - b. difference in value is  $>2$  to  $<4$  and difference in chroma is  $<4$ .
- 2) difference in hue = 1, and
  - a. difference in value is  $\leq 1$  and difference in chroma is  $>1$  to  $<3$ , or
  - b. difference in value is  $>1$  to  $<3$ , and difference in chroma is  $<3$ .
- 3) difference in hue = 2, and
  - a. difference in value = 0 and difference in chroma is  $>0$  to  $<2$ , or
  - b. difference in value is  $>0$  to  $<2$  and difference in chroma is  $<2$ .

**Prominent** - Contrasts strongly with the color to which compared. Color contrasts that are not faint or distinct are prominent.

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- In the following slides, the symbol “ $\Delta$ ”(delta) means “change or difference in”
- For example:  $\Delta h=1$  means the change of hue between the two colors is one 2.5-unit interval
- Example 7.5YR to 10YR  
Use the method given in the technical note to determine hue difference (already covered)

# **IMPORTANT NOTE**

- If the mottle and matrix both have values of  $\leq 3$  and chromas of  $\leq 2$ , the color contrast is faint by definition
- This is regardless of the difference in hue



**Table 1 - Tabular key for contrast determination using Munsell® notation**

Note: If both colors have values of $\leq 3$ and chromas of $\leq 2$ , the color contrast is <i>Faint</i> (regardless of the difference in hue).					
<i>Hues are the same (<math>\Delta h = 0</math>)</i>			<i>Hues differ by 2 (<math>\Delta h = 2</math>)</i>		
$\Delta$ Value	$\Delta$ Chroma	Contrast	$\Delta$ Value	$\Delta$ Chroma	Contrast
0	$\leq 1$	Faint	0	0	Faint
0	2	Distinct	0	1	Distinct
0	3	Distinct	0	$\geq 2$	Prominent
0	$\geq 4$	Prominent	1	$\leq 1$	Distinct
1	$\leq 1$	Faint	1	$\geq 2$	Prominent
1	2	Distinct	$\geq 2$	---	Prominent
1	3	Distinct			
1	$\geq 4$	Prominent			
$\leq 2$	$\leq 1$	Faint			
$\leq 2$	2	Distinct			
$\leq 2$	3	Distinct			
$\leq 2$	$\geq 4$	Prominent			
3	$\leq 1$	Distinct			
3	2	Distinct			
3	3	Distinct			
3	$\geq 4$	Prominent			
$\geq 4$	---	Prominent			
<i>Hues differ by 1 (<math>\Delta h = 1</math>)</i>			<i>Hues differ by 3 or more (<math>\Delta h \geq 3</math>)</i>		
$\Delta$ Value	$\Delta$ Chroma	Contrast	$\Delta$ Value	$\Delta$ Chroma	Contrast
0	$\leq 1$	Faint	Color contrast is prominent, except for low chroma and value.		Prominent
0	2	Distinct			
0	$\geq 3$	Prominent			
1	$\leq 1$	Faint			
1	2	Distinct			
1	$\geq 3$	Prominent			
2	$\leq 1$	Distinct			
2	2	Distinct			
2	$\geq 3$	Prominent			
$\geq 3$	---	Prominent			

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**Hues are the same ( $\Delta h = 0$ )**

$\Delta$ Value	$\Delta$ Chroma	Contrast
0	$\leq 1$	Faint
0	2	Distinct
0	3	Distinct
0	$\geq 4$	Prominent
1	$\leq 1$	Faint
1	2	Distinct
1	3	Distinct
1	$\geq 4$	Prominent
$\leq 2$	$\leq 1$	Faint
$\leq 2$	2	Distinct
$\leq 2$	3	Distinct
$\leq 2$	$\geq 4$	Prominent
3	$\leq 1$	Distinct
3	2	Distinct
3	3	Distinct
3	$\geq 4$	Prominent
$\geq 4$	---	Prominent

$\Delta h = 0$ :

3 Faint

9 Distinct

5 Prominent

(Note that a  $\Delta$  value or  $\Delta$  chroma  $\geq 4$  is prominent)

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<i>Hues differ by 1 (<math>\Delta h = 1</math>)</i>		
$\Delta$ Value	$\Delta$ Chroma	Contrast
0	$\leq 1$	Faint
0	2	Distinct
0	$\geq 3$	Prominent
1	$\leq 1$	Faint
1	2	Distinct
1	$\geq 3$	Prominent
2	$\leq 1$	Distinct
2	2	Distinct
2	$\geq 3$	Prominent
$\geq 3$	---	Prominent

$\Delta h = 1$

2 Faint

4 Distinct

4 Prominent

(Note that a  $\Delta$  value or  $\Delta$  chroma  $\geq 3$  is prominent)

## *Hues differ by 2 ( $\Delta h = 2$ )*

$\Delta$ Value	$\Delta$ Chroma	Contrast
0	0	Faint
0	1	Distinct
0	$\geq 2$	Prominent
1	$\leq 1$	Distinct
1	$\geq 2$	Prominent
$\geq 2$	---	Prominent

$\Delta h = 2$

1 Faint

2 Distinct

3 Prominent  
(Note that a  $\Delta$  value or  $\Delta$  chroma  $\geq 2$  is prominent)

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<i>Hues differ by 3 or more (<math>\Delta h \geq 3</math>)</i>		
$\Delta$ Value	$\Delta$ Chroma	Contrast
Color contrast is prominent, except for low chroma and value.		Prominent

$$\Delta h \geq 3$$

- All color contrast is prominent by definition
- Exception: Colors with values  $\leq 3$  and chromas  $\leq 2$  are faint by definition, regardless of hue change



# Sandy Soil with Redox Features



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# Sandy Redox $\Delta h=2$ ; $\Delta v=2$ ; $\Delta c=5$ ; Contrast is Prominent



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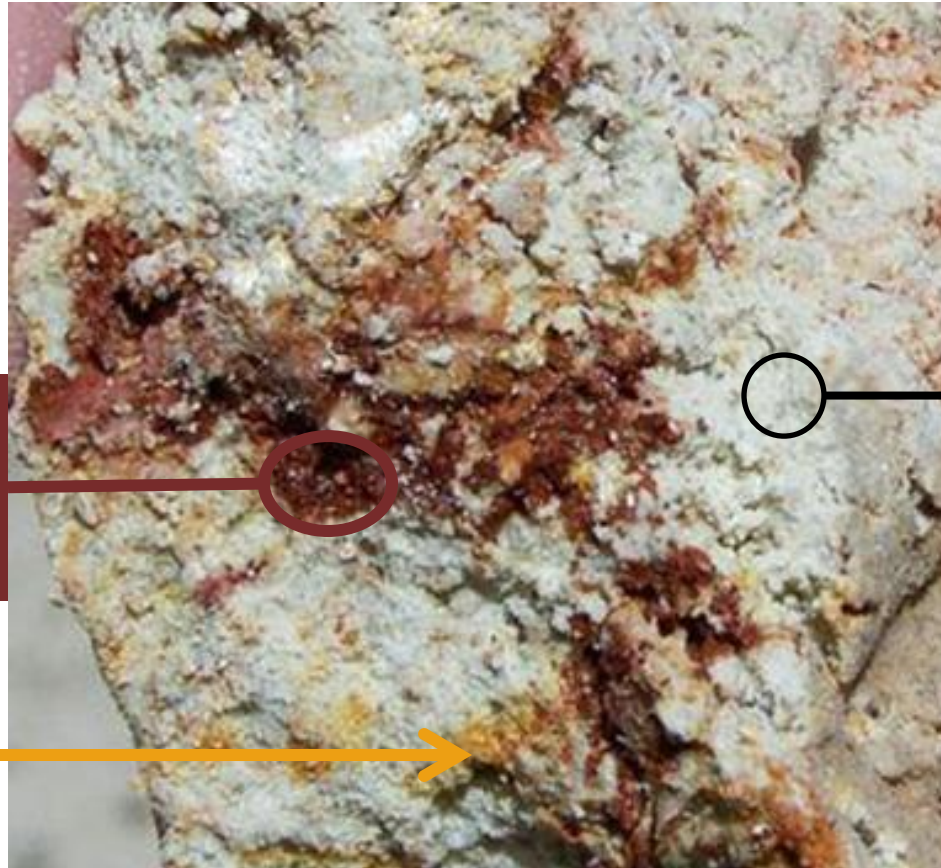
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# Soil Color Contrast in SCL

Color  
contrast  
between  
N 8 and  
7.5YR 8/6?

**5R 3/6  
relict**

**7.5YR 8/6**



**N 8/**

$\Delta h=1$ ;  
 $\Delta v=0$ ;  
 $\Delta c=6$ ;  
contrast is  
prominent

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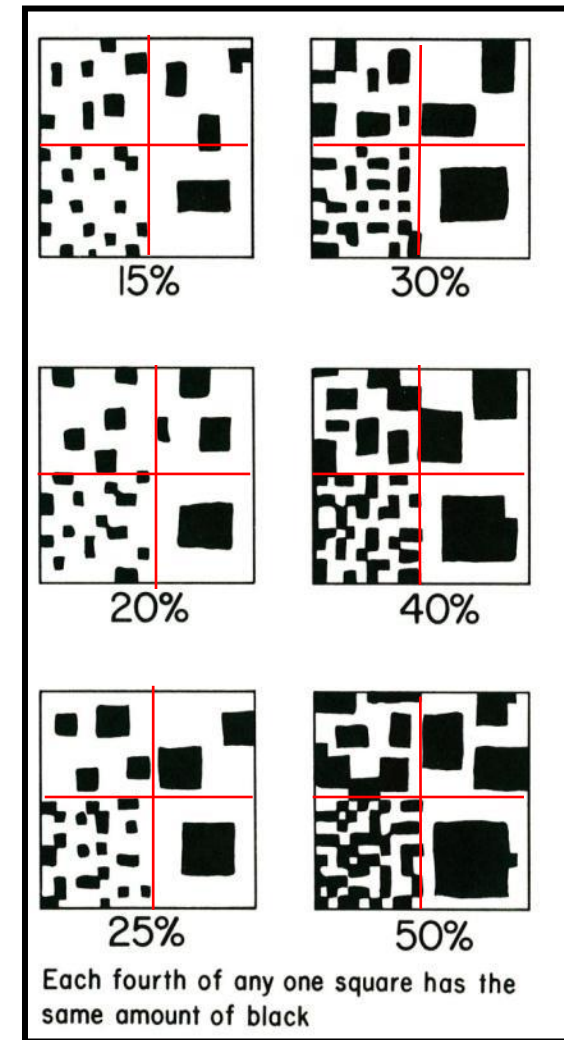
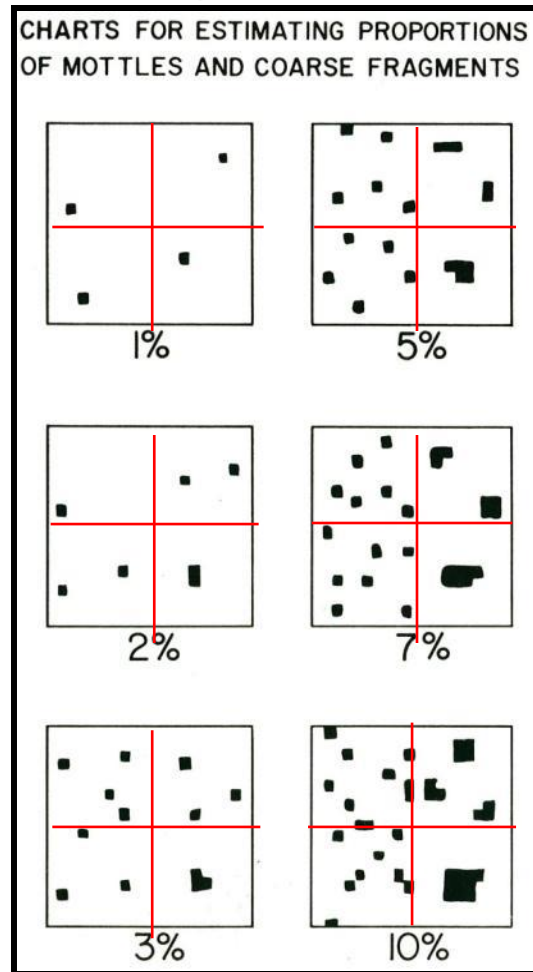
# ***Determining Amount of Mottles***

- Use “Charts for Estimating Proportions of Mottles and Coarse Fragments”
- Quantifies the amount of redox features (uses percentage)
- Located in Munsell Book



# Abundance and Size of Color Contrasting Areas

- **Size of mottles**  
Fine < 5 mm  
Medium 5 to 15 mm  
Coarse > 15 mm
- *Note that the size of the mottles do not matter, only the amount*



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# QUESTIONS?

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# Color or Texture First?

- Color-Redox features could be overlooked due to the physical manipulation of the soil if it was textured first
- All colors in the sample are recorded before texturing
- Multiple colors easily blend
- The same soil sample should be used to color and texture-increases accuracy of the profile

**AT LEAST 4 COLORS EXIST IN SAMPLE**

###

05/20/2008

**BEFORE MIXING**

**AFTER MIXING**

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# Soil Sampling ##

- All samples should come from an area that has not been marred from the action of taking the sample
- Especially true for heavy-textured soils
- Samples come from auger buckets, shovels, backhoe buckets, etc.
- Ensure that sample is as it exists in the ground, not adulterated

# Sampling heavy-textured soils

- Obtain sample from the area of least disturbance, normally interior of the sample
- The soil sample should be broken longitudinally to observe the colors and to collect the sample for texturing



# EXAMPLE IN AUGER BUCKET



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**Outside of sample  
rusted-Air changed  
color of sample,  
now more red (redox  
feature!!)**

## **INSIDE THE AUGER BUCKET**

**Inside of sample-no  
oxidation-correct  
color of soil as it  
appears in profile**



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# Sandy soils ##

- Samples don't normally come out in chunks as do finer textured soils
- Must be unadulterated and unmarred (sandy soils can contain other things)
- When sampling any soil, ensure that sample is a natural sample from the intended area



# Sample Observations ##

- Take the time to properly observe soil sample
- Redox features can be missed while using an auger (use larger bucket auger)
- Larger sample size increases area for SHWT indicator observation
- Sharpshooter-type shovels should be used closer to ground surface



Approximate  
comparison  
between  
samples  
found in  
auger and  
sharpshooter-  
type shovel

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# END OF PRESENTATION

## QUESTIONS?

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