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**Soil quality — Determination of the water-  
retention characteristic — Laboratory  
methods**

*Qualité du sol — Détermination de la caractéristique de la rétention en  
eau — Méthodes de laboratoire*



## Contents

## Page

1	Scope .....	1
2	Definitions .....	1
3	Guidelines for choice of method .....	2
4	Sampling .....	3
5	Determination of the soil water characteristic using sand, kaolin and ceramic suction tables .....	5
6	Determination of soil water characteristic using a porous plate and burette .....	8
7	Determination of soil water characteristic by pressure plate extractor .....	11
8	Determination of soil water characteristic using pressure membrane cells .....	13
9	Precision .....	15
<b>Annexes</b> .....		
<b>A</b> (informative) Construction of suction tables .....		16
<b>B</b> (informative) Bibliography .....		20

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## Foreword

ISO (the International Organization for Standardization) is a worldwide federation of national standards bodies (ISO member bodies). The work of preparing International Standards is normally carried out through ISO technical committees. Each member body interested in a subject for which a technical committee has been established has the right to be represented on that committee. International organizations, governmental and non-governmental, in liaison with ISO, also take part in the work. ISO collaborates closely with the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) on all matters of electrotechnical standardization.

Draft International Standards adopted by the technical committees are circulated to the member bodies for voting. Publication as an International Standard requires approval by at least 75 % of the member bodies casting a vote.

International Standard ISO 11274 was prepared by Technical Committee ISO/TC 190, *Soil quality*, Subcommittee SC 5, *Physical methods*.

Annexes A and B of this International Standard are for information only.

## Introduction

Soil water content and matric pressure are related to each other and determine the water-retention characteristics of a soil. Soil water which is in equilibrium with free water is at zero matric pressure (or suction) and the soil is saturated. As the soil dries, matric pressure decreases (i.e. becomes more negative), and the largest pores empty of water. Progressive decreases in matric pressure will continue to empty finer pores until eventually water is held in only the finest pores. Not only is water removed from soil pores, but the films of water held around soil particles are reduced in thickness. Therefore a decreasing matric pressure is associated with a decreasing soil water content [5], [6]. Laboratory or field measurements of these two parameters can be made and the relationship plotted as a curve, called the soil water-retention characteristic. The relationship extends from saturated soil (approximately 0 kPa) to oven-dry soil (about  $-10^6$  kPa).

The soil water-retention characteristic is different for each soil type. The shape and position of the curve relative to the axes depend on soil properties such as texture, density and hysteresis associated with the wetting and drying history. Individual points on the water-retention characteristic may be determined for specific purposes.

The results obtained using these methods can be used, for example:

- to provide an assessment of the equivalent pore size distribution (e.g. identification of macro- and micropores);
- to determine indices of plant-available water in the soil and to classify soil accordingly (e.g. for irrigation purposes);
- to determine the drainable pore space (e.g. for drainage design, pollution risk assessments);
- to monitor changes in the structure of a soil (caused by e.g. tillage, compaction or addition of organic matter or synthetic soil conditioners);
- to ascertain the relationship between the negative matric pressure and other soil physical properties (e.g. hydraulic conductivity, thermal conductivity);
- to determine water content at specific negative matric pressures (e.g. for microbiological degradation studies);
- to estimate other soil physical properties (e.g. hydraulic conductivity).