The large expanse of level to gently rolling, deep, productive soils that extends from the foothills of the Appalachians westward to the Great Plains and from the Canadian boundary southward to the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers comprises the midwestern United States, or Midwest. The region was originally covered with forest and tall grass prairies.

The first agriculture of the region was a mixed type that provided for the various needs of the pioneers. As transportation facilities developed, permitting exchange of products with other areas, the agriculture became more specialized. Soil and climatic conditions were particularly favorable for the production of corn, and the region soon developed into what has become known as the Corn Belt of the United States.

The first half-century of agriculture in the region (1800–1850) was characterized by bounteous harvests of all kinds of crops on the new lands, and little concern was evidenced for the depletion of soil fertility. Total production of crops was maintained in the second half-century of agriculture (1850–1900) by clearing of additional land. During this period, concern about declining fertility of the older cropland led to the establishment of the agricultural experiment stations. However, it was not until early in the 20th century that extensive field investigations of crop responses to added lime were conducted.

The fundamental principles of soil fertility maintenance were established in the third half-century of agriculture (1900–1950), and measures