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King Saud University  
College of Food and Agric. Sciences  
Soil Science Department

Fundamentals of Soil Science

### 3.5. Plant-Soil Water Relations

... When rain falls on the soil, water is pulled or sucked down into the soil by capillary action (through small pores). If free water builds up on the surface of the soil, water may flow freely down through large macropores. ... Water, in excess of the ability of the soil to retain adhesion (between soil particle surfaces and water molecules) and cohesion (between water molecules) water, exists in the large pore space and moves downward in response to **gravity** and the **suction** or **pull** of the underlying soil pores. This excess or gravitational water moves downward and moistens drier soil below. We see, then, that water that was considered gravitational at one level becomes capillary water at a lower level in drier soil. Under these conditions, the water moves downward as a front (Figure 1). A sharp line of demarcation is formed between the moist upper layer and

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the drier lower layer, and this line may persist for days. The upper moist soil layer is at **field capacity**, which is the water content of soil in the field after the gravitational water has drained out. The moistened soil layer at field capacity has about half of the pore spaces filled with air (macropores) and only half of the pore space is filled with water (film water plus water in capillary pores). ... Water stops moving downward into the drier soil when water in films is held more tightly.

At field capacity, plants roots can easily absorb water. Eventually, if no additional water is added to the soil, the plant will absorb water slower than water is lost by transpiration. A water deficit is developed inside the plant and, eventually, wilting occurs.

The water between field capacity and wilt point is considered the available water for plants.

### 3.5.1. Effect of Texture on Available Water

... Water holding capacity is related to structure as well as to texture. Fine-textured soils have the maximum **total** water-holding capacity but that maximum **available** water is held in medium-textured soils. Research has shown that available water in many soils is closely correlated with the content of

silt and very fine sand. ... It is generally known that sandy soils are more droughty than clayey soils. One reason is that the finer-textured soils are able to retain more available water. ... Note that maximum available water-holding capacity occurs in the silt loam soil.

## References

Foth, H. D. 1978. Fundamentals of Soil Science. John Wiley & Sons, New York, USA



**Figure 1** Moisture relationships 1 day after a rain when the soil was near the wilt point to a depth of 3 feet (1 meter) or more. The sharp line of demarcation between the moist upper and drier lower layer should be observed (Source: Foth, 1978).