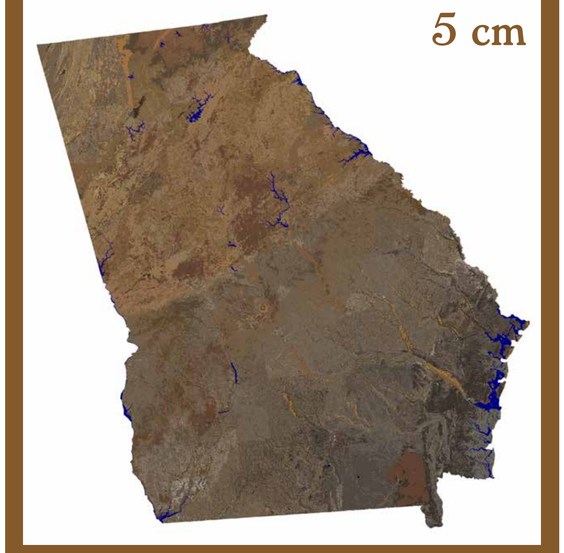
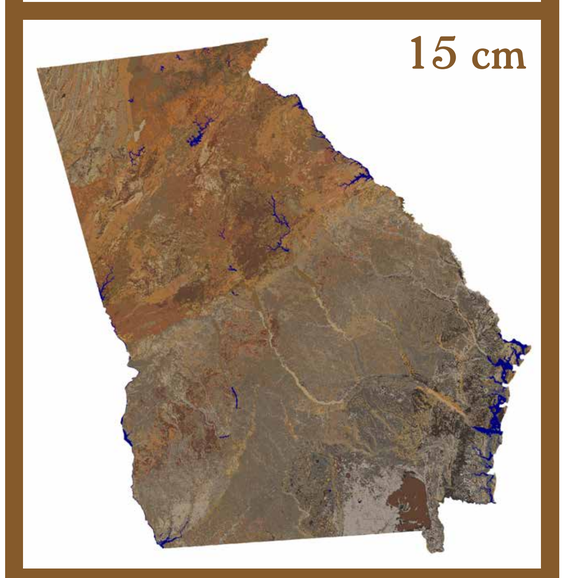
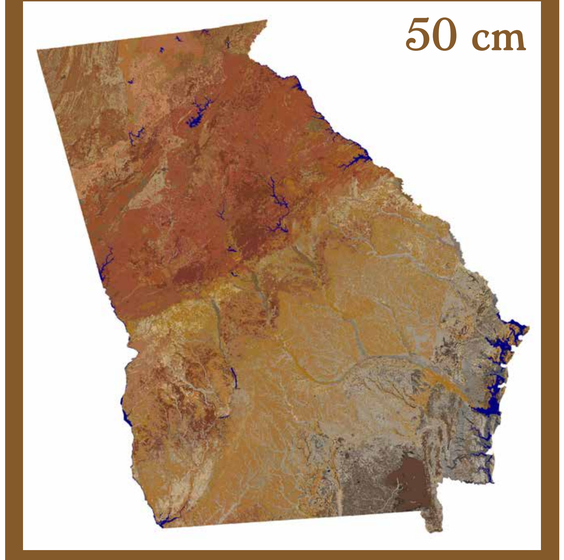
United States Department of Agriculture

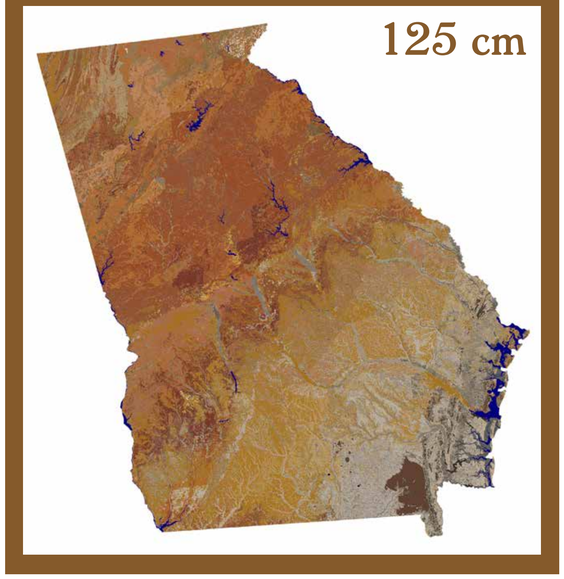
Map of the Month

June





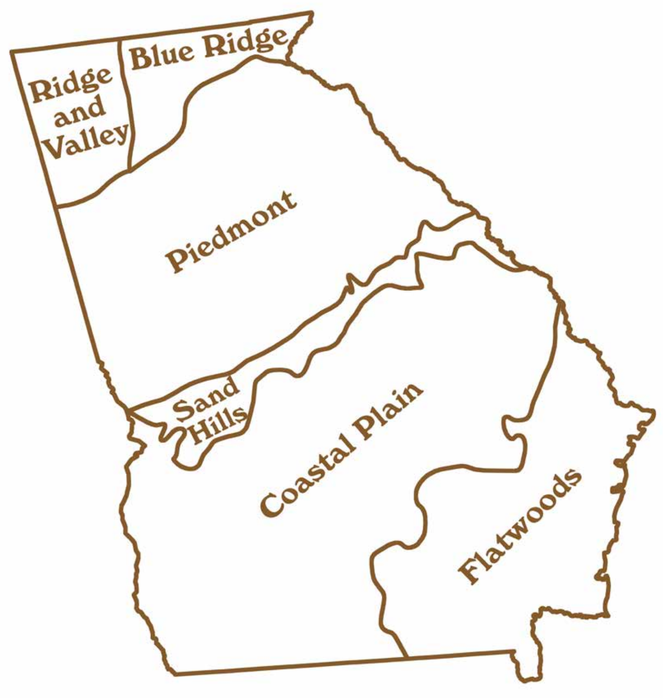




Soil Colors – A Mosaic of Stories Told in Color

Arguably, soil colors are one of the few things that are of equal interest to natural resource scientists at work and to children at play. The USDA Soil and Plant Science Division recently developed a set of images and map layers to communicate the complexity, variability, and magnificence of soils and soil colors. In nature, soils occupy a three-dimensional space. This recent effort affords the opportunity to observe changes in soils and inherent soil properties both horizontally (across the landscape) and vertically (with depth). These maps and images present technical value for scientists, geographers, and educators but also have significance for anyone who simply appreciates the beauty that unfolds as art within the medley of colors. In order to assemble the information, the dominant soil was identified for areas mapped during soil surveys and the color was extracted from the official soil series description at eight depths.

This effort was made possible as the result of the USDA's 120-year-old soil mapping program. Over the course of its rich history, the program has completed more than 5,000 soil survey projects, cataloged some 30,000 field sites, and collected over 180,000 soil samples across the United States and around the world. The resulting database, the largest such in the world, makes it possible for soil scientists to generate specialized maps using computer-aided techniques. Additional soil-color maps are available online from the USDA-NRCS. Search for "Soil Colors of the Continental United States." Maps are available for the entire continental United States and for each of the individual conterminous States.



A closer look at Georgia demonstrates the ability of soil color to communicate information. Four of the eight color slices for the State are shown. Color changes by depth are easy to see, but you can also identify broad regions by patterns and groupings of color. Contrast the reds of the Piedmont to the yellows of the Coastal Plain to the grays of the Flatwoods. Soil colors vary due to the conditions under which the soils formed and to the physical, chemical, and biological forces currently acting on them.