



# Standard Test Methods for Determination of the Soil Water Characteristic Curve for Desorption Using Hanging Column, Pressure Extractor, Chilled Mirror Hygrometer, or Centrifuge<sup>1</sup>

This standard is issued under the fixed designation D 6836; the number immediately following the designation indicates the year of original adoption or, in the case of revision, the year of last revision. A number in parentheses indicates the year of last reapproval. A superscript epsilon ( $\epsilon$ ) indicates an editorial change since the last revision or reapproval.

<sup>ε1</sup> NOTE—Mercury warning and other minor changes were editorially added in November 2008.

<sup>ε2</sup> NOTE—"ln" was editorially corrected to "ln" in Eq 12 in March 2009.

## 1. Scope

1.1 These test methods cover the determination of soil water characteristic curves (SWCCs) for desorption (drying). SWCCs describe the relationship between suction and volumetric water content, gravimetric water content, or degree of water saturation. SWCCs are also referred to as soil water retention curves, soil water release curves, or capillary pressure curves.

1.2 This standard describes five methods (A-E) for determining the soil water characteristic curve. Method A (hanging column) is suitable for making determinations for suctions in the range of 0 to 80 kPa. Method B (pressure chamber with volumetric measurement) and Method C (pressure chamber with gravimetric measurement) are suitable for suctions in the range of 0 to 1500 kPa. Method D (chilled mirror hygrometer) is suitable for making determinations for suctions in the range of 500 kPa to 100 MPa. Method E (centrifuge method) is suitable for making determinations in the range 0 to 120 kPa. Method A typically is used for coarse soils with little fines that drain readily. Methods B and C typically are used for finer soils which retain water more tightly. Method D is used when suctions near saturation are not required and commonly is employed to define the dry end of the soil water characteristic curve (that is, water contents corresponding to suctions > 1000 kPa). Method E is typically used for coarser soils where an appreciable amount of water can be extracted with suctions up to 120 kPa. The methods may be combined to provide a detailed description of the soil water characteristic curve. In this application, Method A or E is used to define the soil water

characteristic curve at lower suctions (0 to 80 kPa for A, 0 to 120 kPa for E) near saturation and to accurately identify the air entry suction, Method B or C is used to define the soil water characteristic curve for intermediate water contents and suctions (100 to 1000 kPa), and Method D is used to define the soil water characteristic curves at low water contents and higher suctions (> 1000 kPa).

1.3 All observed and calculated values shall conform to the guide for significant digits and rounding established in Practice D 6026. The procedures in Practice D 6026 that are used to specify how data are collected, recorded, and calculated are regarded as the industry standard. In addition, they are representative of the significant digits that should generally be retained. The procedures do not consider material variation, purpose for obtaining the data, special purpose studies, or any considerations for the objectives of the user. Increasing or reducing the significant digits of reported data to be commensurate with these considerations is common practice. Consideration of the significant digits to be used in analysis methods for engineering design is beyond the scope of this standard.

1.4 The values stated in SI units are to be regarded as standard. No other units of measurement are included in this standard.

1.5 **Warning**—Mercury has been designated by EPA and many state agencies as a hazardous material that can cause central nervous system, kidney, and liver damage. Mercury, or its vapor, may be hazardous to health and corrosive to materials. Caution should be taken when handling mercury and mercury-containing products. See the applicable product Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) for details and EPA's website (<http://www.epa.gov/mercury/faq.htm>) for additional information. Users should be aware that selling mercury or mercury-containing products, or both, in your state may be prohibited by state law.

<sup>1</sup> These test methods are under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee D18 on Soil and Rock and are the direct responsibility of Subcommittee D18.04 on Hydrologic Properties and Hydraulic Barriers.

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1.6 This standard does not purport to address all of the safety concerns, if any, associated with its use. It is the responsibility of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety and health practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.

## 2. Referenced Documents

### 2.1 ASTM Standards:<sup>2</sup>

- D 421 Practice for Dry Preparation of Soil Samples for Particle-Size Analysis and Determination of Soil Constants
- D 425 Test Method for Centrifuge Moisture Equivalent of Soils
- D 653 Terminology Relating to Soil, Rock, and Contained Fluids
- D 698 Test Methods for Laboratory Compaction Characteristics of Soil Using Standard Effort (12 400 ft-lbf/ft<sup>3</sup>(600 kN-m/m<sup>3</sup>))
- D 854 Test Methods for Specific Gravity of Soil Solids by Water Pycnometer
- D 2216 Test Methods for Laboratory Determination of Water (Moisture) Content of Soil and Rock by Mass
- D 3740 Practice for Minimum Requirements for Agencies Engaged in Testing and/or Inspection of Soil and Rock as Used in Engineering Design and Construction
- D 4753 Guide for Evaluating, Selecting, and Specifying Balances and Standard Masses for Use in Soil, Rock, and Construction Materials Testing
- D 5084 Test Methods for Measurement of Hydraulic Conductivity of Saturated Porous Materials Using a Flexible Wall Permeameter
- D 6026 Practice for Using Significant Digits in Geotechnical Data

### 2.2 API Standard:

- API RP 40 Recommended Practice for Core-Analysis Procedure<sup>3</sup>

## 3. Terminology

3.1 For common definitions of other terms in this standard see Terminology D 653.

### 3.2 Definitions of Terms Specific to This Standard:

3.2.1 *air entry pressure*—the air pressure required to introduce air into and through the pores of a saturated porous plate.

3.2.2 *air entry suction*,  $\psi_a$ —the suction required to introduce air into and through the pores of a saturated porous material.

3.2.3 *axis translation*—the principle stating that a matric suction  $\psi$  can be applied to a soil by controlling the pore gas pressure,  $u_g$ , and the pore water pressure,  $u_w$ , so that the difference between the pore gas pressure and pore water pressure equals the desired matric suction, that is,  $\psi = u_g - u_w$ .

3.2.4 *gravimetric water content*,  $w$ —the ratio of the mass of water contained in the pore spaces of soil or rock to the mass of solid particles.

3.2.5 *matric suction*,  $\psi$ —the negative gage pressure, relative to an external gas pressure acting on the soil water, that must be applied to a solution identical in composition to the soil water to maintain equilibrium through a porous membrane existing between the solution and the soil water. Matric suction is also referred to as matric potential, capillary suction, and capillary potential. By definition, matric suction is the difference between the pore gas pressure,  $u_g$ , and the pore water pressure,  $u_w$ , that is,  $\psi = u_g - u_w$ . In most cases the pore gas is air.

3.2.6 *osmotic suction*,  $\psi_o$ —the negative gage pressure derived from the measurement of the vapor pressure of water in equilibrium with a solution identical in composition with the soil water, relative to the vapor pressure of water in equilibrium with free pure water. Osmotic suction is also referred to as osmotic potential.

3.2.7 *porous membrane*—a porous polymeric membrane that can transmit water and has an air entry pressure exceeding the highest matric suction to be applied during a test.

3.2.8 *porous plate*—a plate made of metal, ceramic, or other porous material that can transmit water and has an air entry pressure exceeding the highest matric suction to be applied during a test.

3.2.9 *pressure chamber*—a vessel used to apply a gas pressure on the specimen and the soil pores to induce a specified matric suction.

3.2.10 *saturated water content*—volumetric or gravimetric water content when the specimen is saturated.

3.2.11 *soil water characteristic curve*—a graph of suction (matric or total) versus water content (gravimetric or volumetric) or saturation. The soil water characteristic curve is also referred to as the soil water retention curve, the soil water release curve, and the capillary pressure curve.

3.2.12 *total suction*,  $\psi_t$ —the negative gage pressure derived from the measurement of the vapor pressure of water in equilibrium with water in the soil pores, relative to the vapor pressure of water in equilibrium with free pure water. Total suction is the sum of matric and osmotic suction,  $\psi_t = \psi + \psi_o$ . Total suction is also referred to as total potential.

3.2.13 *volumetric water content*,  $\theta$ —the ratio of the volume of water contained in the pore spaces of soil or rock to the total volume of soil and rock.

3.2.14 *water activity*,  $a_w$ —the ratio of vapor pressure of water in the soil gas to the saturated vapor pressure at the existing soil temperature. Water activity is also referred to as the relative humidity.

## 4. Summary of Methods

4.1 *Methods A-C*—Methods A-C yield soil water characteristic curves in terms of matric suction. Various suctions are applied to the soil and the corresponding water contents are measured. Two different procedures are used to apply the suction. In Method A, the matric suction is applied by reducing the pore water pressure while maintaining the pore gas pressure at the atmospheric condition. In Methods B and C, the pore

<sup>2</sup> For referenced ASTM standards, visit the ASTM website, [www.astm.org](http://www.astm.org), or contact ASTM Customer Service at [service@astm.org](mailto:service@astm.org). For *Annual Book of ASTM Standards* volume information, refer to the standard's Document Summary page on the ASTM website.

<sup>3</sup> Available from American Petroleum Institute (API), 1220 L. St., NW, Washington, DC 20005-4070, <http://www.api.org>.

water pressure is maintained at atmospheric pressure, and the pore gas pressure is raised to apply the suction via the axis translation principle.

4.1.1 For all three methods, saturated soil specimens are placed in contact with a water saturated porous plate or membrane. The matric suction is applied by one of the two aforementioned procedures. Application of the matric suction causes water to flow from the specimen until the equilibrium water content corresponding to the applied suction is reached. Equilibrium is established by monitoring when water ceases to flow from the specimen. Several equilibria are established at successive matric suctions to construct a soil water characteristic curve.

4.1.2 The water content corresponding to the applied suction is determined in one of two ways. For Methods A and B, the volume of water expelled is measured using a capillary tube. The water content is then determined based on the known initial water content of the specimen and the volume of water expelled. For Method C, the water content is measured gravimetrically by weighing the specimen after removal from the apparatus.

4.2 *Method D*—Method D yields a soil water characteristic curve in terms of total suction. In contrast to Methods A-C, the water content of the soil is controlled in Method D, and the corresponding suctions are measured. Two different approaches are commonly used. In one approach, a set of specimens are prepared that are essentially identical, but have different water contents. Water contents are selected that span the range of water contents that will be used to define the soil water characteristic curve. In the other approach, a single specimen is used. The specimen is tested, dried to a lower water content, and then tested again. This process is repeated until suctions have been measured at all of the desired water contents.

4.2.1 In Method D, the water activity of the pore water is measured using a chilled mirror hygrometer (also known as a chilled mirror psychrometer) and then the total suction is computed using the Kelvin equation. In many cases, Method D is used to determine only that portion of the soil water characteristic curve corresponding to higher suctions (typically > 1000 kPa) and lower water contents. Under these conditions, the osmotic component of total suction is generally small, and the matric and total suctions are comparable. Thus, the data from Methods A-C and Method D can be combined to form a single soil water characteristic curve. An example of this type of soil water characteristic curve is provided in Section 11.

4.3 *Method E*—Method E yields a soil water characteristic curve in terms of matric suction (or capillary pressure). The specimen is contained in a support chamber that is subjected to a centrifugal force in a centrifuge. Different matric suctions are applied by varying the angular velocity of the centrifuge. Water displaced from the soil at a given angular velocity is collected and measured in a calibrated cylinder at the base of the support chamber. A soil water characteristic curve is measured by subjecting the specimen to a series of angular velocities (each corresponding to a matric suction) and measuring the volume of water displaced from the soil at each velocity.

## 5. Significance and Use

5.1 The soil water characteristic curve (SWCC) is fundamental to hydrological characterization of unsaturated soils and is required for most analyses of water movement in unsaturated soils. The SWCC is also used in characterizing the shear strength and compressibility of unsaturated soils. The unsaturated hydraulic conductivity of soil is often estimated using properties of the SWCC and the saturated hydraulic conductivity.

5.2 This method applies only to soils containing two pore fluids: a gas and a liquid. The liquid is usually water and the gas is usually air. Other liquids may also be used, but caution must be exercised if the liquid being used causes excessive shrinkage or swelling of the soil matrix.

5.3 A full investigation has not been conducted regarding the correlation between soil water characteristic curves obtained using this method and soil water characteristics curves of in-place materials. Thus, results obtained from this method should be applied to field situations with caution and by qualified personnel.

NOTE 1—The quality of the result produced by this standard depends on the competence of the personnel performing the test and the suitability of the equipment and facilities used. Agencies that meet the criteria of Practice D 3740 are generally considered capable of competent and objective testing, sampling, inspection, etc. Users of this standard are cautioned that compliance with Practice D 3740 does not in itself ensure reliable results. Reliable results depend on many factors. Practice D 3740 provides a means of evaluating some of these factors.

## 6. Apparatus

6.1 *Hanging Column Apparatus (Method A)*—A hanging column apparatus consists of three parts: a specimen chamber, an outflow measurement tube, and a suction supply (Fig. 1). The specimen chamber consists of a glass or rigid plastic funnel containing a porous plate that is large enough to contain the specimen being tested. Such funnels are commonly referred to as “Buchner” funnels. A photograph of a funnel used for a hanging column apparatus is shown in Fig. 2. Water expelled from the specimen during the test is measuring using a capillary tube connected to the outflow end of the funnel. The other end of this capillary tube is connected to suction supply consisting of two reservoirs. The relative elevation of the two reservoirs is adjusted to develop a vacuum, which is transmitted to the capillary tube. The magnitude of the applied suction is measured with a manometer.

6.2 *Pressure Chamber (Methods B and C)*—Pressure chambers are used for the pressure extraction method to apply a gas pressure (typically air pressure) to the specimen and the gas in the pores. Typically the pressure chamber is a metallic vessel. The pressure chamber shall be pressure-rated, at the very least, for the maximum pressure to be applied to the vessel during the test. The pressure chamber shall have a sealed, non-collapsing outflow tube that connects the atmospheric pressure side of the porous plate (or membrane) to the outside of the pressure chamber. Schematics of two types of pressure chambers are shown in Figs. 4 and 5. Photographs of these pressure chambers are shown in Fig. 4. In some cases, the effects of