

Let soil be thy medicine

I remember being told by my mother when I was a child that there is such a thing as ‘clean dirt’, which is different from the other kind of dirt. I liked the idea of clean dirt, probably because it meant that I didn’t have to wash my hands or change my muddy trousers.

Getting some clean dirt on us is a great idea when it comes to raising healthy, robust children. You might have heard of the ‘farm effect’ – the discovery that children raised on farms are less likely to suffer from asthma and allergies than urban children. It is believed that the main reason for this is that such children are exposed to a greater diversity of microbes than children living in cities, and that this provides excellent training for their developing immune systems.¹ This reduction in allergies can be as much as 50%, according to a study of Amish children raised on farms.²

It is thought that the so-called farm effect is largely to do with soil. Healthy soil is teeming with microorganisms; in fact it has more of them per teaspoonful than there are people on the planet. Because we evolved with these organisms, we have a close symbiotic relationship with them: we need each other in order to have good health. We feed them, and in return they help to extract micronutrients from food and balance our immune systems, as well as keeping unwanted pathogens away.

Populating ourselves and our children with microbes typically found in soil may also improve mental health. In her book *The Dirt Cure: Growing Healthy Kids with Food Straight from Soil*, neurologist Maya Shetreat-Klein suggests that spending time outdoors and being exposed to soil microbes can improve attention span and cognition in children.

Of course, the quality of the soil is key. Fertile, organic soil found in nature or on organic farms is very different from the barren, pesticide-soaked soil of commercial farms or the lead-soaked soil in some urban areas. Getting out to where there is rich, natural soil, such as in national parks, forests and organic farms, or in well-tended city farms and parks, is an excellent way to integrate with the kinds of organism we want to be associating with.

Eating produce grown in rich, organic soil is another way. It encourages farmers to nurture the soil we have, and it also means that some of the organisms on that produce will hitch a ride into our guts, where they can do their valuable work. Plants grown on high-quality soil fertilised with composts and manures are also often higher in phytonutrients than commercially grown plants.

Commercial farming has depleted our soils to such an extent that we now have only a hundred harvests left – enough for just fifty

years. Since our health and the health of our flora and fauna are so intrinsically linked with our soil quality, it makes perfect sense that we should all do what we can to save our soil.

How we can both benefit the soil and benefit from our soil:

- Encourage infants and children to play outdoors as much as possible, in gardens, parks and forests.
- Support organic farming by growing or buying organic produce grown in high-quality soil.
- Reduce the use of garden weedkiller.
- Cultivate garden or allotment soil with composts and manures.
- Grow vegetables, herbs and other plants on an allotment, in a garden, or in patio pots. ●

References

1. Gabriela Wlasiuk and Donata Vercelli, ‘The farm effect, or: when, what and how a farming environment protects from asthma and allergic disease’, *Current Opinion in Allergy and Clinical Immunology* 12:5 (2012), 461–6.
2. Mark Holbreich et al., ‘Amish children living in northern Indiana have a very low prevalence of allergic sensitization’, *The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* 129:6 (2012), 1671–3.

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