

Building Soil



Snow is melting off the mountains. Rivers have peaked with snowmelt and are slowly receding. The first seeds are sprouting from the warm, moist earth. The garden calls.

I'm getting started on the fifth garden here on Charolais Heights. When I first moved in, it was clear it would take five years to build quality soil in raised beds. I learned that this hillside is mainly rock, the small amount of dirt on top is a façade. So, every fall and/or spring I've been shredding leaves, hauling manure, spreading compost, layer on top of layer each year and now it's getting close. I've also been using straw bales to plant in. As the bales compost, I add another bale the following year. Five years later...soil.

Building soil is one of my favorite parts of gardening, even more so than harvesting vegetables. So much of success in the garden is dependent on the soil, earth. The health of soil has a big impact on diseases, bugs, plant vigor and fruits. I find that focusing on soil quality gives seeds, starts and plants a strong foundation to be healthy, not requiring a lot of other amendments, herbicides or pesticides.

Healthy soil contributes more than nutrition to growing plants. Soil has a diverse and complex ecosystem of micro organisms, bacteria, beneficial insects, and my favorite, worms. Happy soil has worms and worms keep making the soil happier creating a symbiotic relationship.

Earth and Chinese Medicine

*There is nothing which heaven does not cover
and nothing which earth does not sustain.*

Chuang Tzu
369-286 B.C.

This year while working in the garden, I see more clearly the analogy between garden soil health and the concept of earth in Chinese medicine. Earth is one of the five elements: earth, metal, water, wood, fire that express different kinds of energy in body, mind and spirit.

The earth element describes the ground, foundation, base that the other elements, the physical body structure and organs all depend upon. The earth organ system is the spleen/pancreas, which is responsible for intake, assimilation and absorption of nutrients. This organ helps transform food of the earth into usable energy for the body, mind and spirit.

The earth element also represents the center. When the core is strong, we are centered and grounded. When the earth element is weak, we can feel uncentered, ungrounded. The strength of the earth element has a large influence on our overall sense of balance, harmony and well-being. Disease, literally dis-ease, more easily develops when we feel out of balance or not in harmony.

The stability and strength of a large tree is dependent on strong roots that are deeply anchored in the earth. The stability of our body is also based on how well we are connected to the earth.

Earth energy in the body describes nurturance, how we nourish ourselves. Taking in nourishment involves food and all things that nourish us, like touch, nature, relationships, art.

What are some ways to strengthen our body/earth energy?

Listen

A key aspect of tending garden soil is to regularly observe and feel the dirt. This gives us important information about how it is doing. We might notice moisture content, bugs, worms, density. Only by paying attention to the soil can we respond to its needs.



This is also true with our body. Listening to what the body, mind and spirit needs and doesn't need provides direction on how to support our earth energy.

If we don't listen to the body's need for rest, the earth energy of stability weakens, making dis-ease more likely.

The body has sophisticated and exquisite ways to let us know what is needed. Listening allows us to find and provide what is needed.

One part of listening to the body is recognizing what is needed and also what the body doesn't need. Continually providing the body with things it doesn't need is like putting rocks in garden soil. It weakens the nourishing aspects.



Patience

Building soil in the garden takes time. Creating raised beds on this rocky hillside takes about five years to get established. Then, every year after it continues to improve. Now, I'm focused on the second five year process.

Patience is also helpful when building the internal earth energy. Trying to somehow follow the perfect diet, exercise and rest plan to achieve immediate results will probably be as frustrating and disappointing as expecting first year garden soil to produce bumper crops.

Practicing patience requires that we understand this kind of core stability takes time. An approach of regular, consistent cultivation of our earth energy is cumulative over time.

Timing

Fall is a great time to build garden soil. Applying compost, manure and mulch in the fall allows it to mature and breakdown by planting time.

Timing is also valuable when building our internal earth energy. If we wait until we are exhausted, sick or in a super stressful phase, it is very difficult to build deep nourishing earth energy. For example, if someone regularly gets upper respiratory infections in the fall, focusing on strengthening in spring and summer can be more effective than waiting until a sinus infection begins in the fall.

Timing can also be an important aspect in how we nourish earth energy. For example, only exercising on the weekends for several hours may not be as useful as doing shorter amounts of exercise daily.

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The details of what nourishes earth energy can vary between individuals. The same thing doesn't work for everyone. Finding what works for you can be the practice of the moment. Listening, patience and timing can greatly facilitate this process.

Like soil in the garden, if we focus on caring for our internal earth element, it provides a healthy base for body, mind and spirit.

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