

WE NEED TO STOP TREATING SOIL LIKE DIRT EVEN IN CITIES

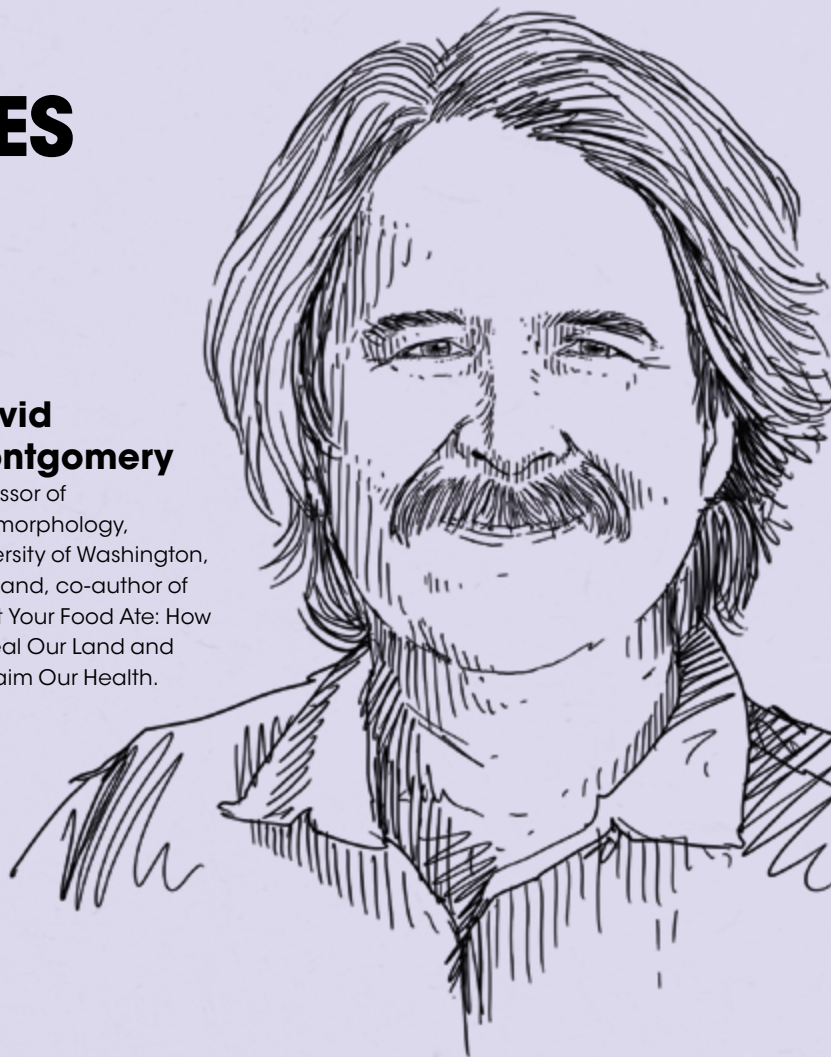
When Anne and I bought a house in Seattle, it came with a decades-old lawn that looked ripe for planting a garden. We weren't counting on the fact that beneath the grassy monoculture lay barren dirt, with little life and no worms to be seen, and it wasn't the foundation for a dream garden. So Anne embarked on a soil-building crusade. She gathered organic matter wherever possible, raking up leaves from other yards, taking coffee grounds from local coffee shops and wood chips from local arborists, and even entering a lottery that gave away composted herbivore manure from the zoo.

So as I was exploring the depressing history linking soil degradation to the decline of past societies,¹ Anne was reversing the process in our new yard. Through intensive composting and mulching, she dramatically increased the organic matter content of our yard's soil, turning it from a pale khaki color to a rich dark chocolate hue. It only took a couple of years to notice our soil transform and catalyze changes above ground.

Looking into the drama playing out right outside our backdoor led us to delve into *The Hidden Half of Nature*,² the out-of-sight, out-of-mind world of microbial ecology in the soil beneath our feet. It also brought to light how restoring life below ground leads to a blossoming of life above ground. All too often, we lose sight of the importance of how the soil we usually take for granted sha-

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pes the mix of species with which we share our urban world.

Life will always share our cities with us. Certain species have learned to thrive amidst our settlements. But much of the life sharing our yards and neighborhoods reflects how we care for our urban spaces and soils. Do we want to share our world with flowers, trees, pollinators, and songbirds? Or will we be satisfied with the likes of rats and crows?

We can build healthy, fertile soil on planting strips, yards, roof-

tops, and pots on patios and balconies, and it doesn't take much space. Restoring life to urban soils can help address urban food deserts and enhance urban biodiversity with species we like to share our lives with.

And in looking into the relationship between soil health and human health while writing our most recent book, *What Your Food Ate*,³ we found solid connections between soil health, plant health, livestock health, and human health. It all goes to show that—even in cities—what's good for the land is good for us too.

Quote as: Montgomery, D.R. We Need to Stop Treating Soil Like Dirt Even in Cities. P. 239. In: Mejia, M.A., Amaya-Espinel, J.D. (eds.), *BiodiverCities by 2030: Transforming Cities with Biodiversity*. Bogotá. Instituto de Investigación de Recursos Biológicos Alexander von Humboldt. 2022. 288 pages.