

Recommendations for Your Gardening Library

The Hidden Half of Nature: The Microbial Roots of Life and Health

David R. Montgomery and Anne Biklé. W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 2015. 320 pages. Publisher's price, hardcover: \$26.95.

AS MOST GARDENERS know, healthy plants require healthy soil. *The Hidden Half of Nature* offers insight into the soil life forms—specifically the microbes—that play an essential role in supporting plant growth. It also explores an intriguing link between these microbes and the microbes in our digestive systems that affect our health.

For authors David R. Montgomery and Anne Biklé, their path to this revelatory connection began with puttering in the garden. As they became more accomplished organic gardeners, their interest turned to the “hidden half,” the life in the soil. What, exactly, was it that made their garden soil so productive?

In this book, they discuss subjects such as nitrogen-fixing bacteria that colonize legume roots; beneficial fungi that absorb minerals directly into root cells (mycorrhizal association); the vibrant root ecology where nutrients are absorbed (the rhizosphere); the chemical exudates that help release minerals into a form roots can absorb; and useful bacteria that interfere with pathogens.

In the midst of their research, Biklé was diagnosed with cancer. She emerged with a clean bill of health after surgery, but this experience led her to investigate the beneficial microbes that colonize human digestive organs and their roles in keeping us healthy. Our bodies and the soil may seem like disparate entities, yet the authors draw many fascinating parallels.

Montgomery and Biklé also review some of the earlier proponents of organic or sustainable farming: Sir Albert Howard of the 1930s, Lady Eve Balfour in the 1940s, and William Albrecht of the 1950s. All proposed a link between the organic nurturing of the soil and a healthy body, but it's only recently that these assumptions have been scientifically substantiated.

On that note, I love scientific detail so I appreciate this book's copious footnotes and citations for further inquiry. I would have preferred more depth to the index, but this is a minor quibble.

Overall, the authors make a strong case for “working with rather than against the microbial communities that underpin the health of plants and people.” This book will illuminate the connections between what we feed the soil and ourselves.

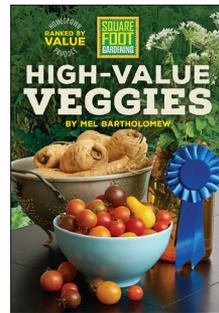
—Robert Kourik

Robert Kourik is the author of 15 gardening books, including Understanding Roots. Visit him at www.robertkourik.com.

High-Value Veggies

Mel Bartholomew. Cool Springs Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2016. 128 pages. Publisher's price, softcover: \$17.99.

THE BEST-SELLING author of *Square Foot Gardening*, Mel Bartholomew, who died earlier this year, has helped millions of gardeners create intensive, high-yielding vegetable gardens. All of his books approach gardening through the lens of his engineering and construction background, and *High-Value Veggies* is no exception. While there are loads of books with how-to-grow instructions for herbs and vegetables, this book helps readers select crops that yield the greatest dollar value.



Bartholomew acknowledges growing veggies your family will eat is an essential first step. To help with the rest of the selection process, he calculated Return on Investment (ROI) for popular crops. Part One explains how he used factors such as yield per square foot, cost per pound, and the cost of supplies and labor to develop the formula.

Part Two presents herbs and vegetables in order from most to least value. Each is accompanied by a chart listing yield per foot, cost per pound, value of harvest, cost of input (labor and materials), and net value or ROI. Herbs rank highest because of their high cost per pound, and the list contains many of the most popular culinary herbs. The top-scoring vegetable is parsnip, followed by tomatoes, then garlic, turnips, and leeks. In all, 42 types of vegetables and herbs are included.

The text for each entry includes basic cultural information, but this book is far more useful for selecting crops than learning how to grow them. Readers will undoubtedly want to use another reference for nitty-gritty growing specifics.

Bartholomew recognizes that gardening isn't all about numbers, though, and that other factors influence the crops we grow. Part Three provides alternative lists for selecting crops, including vegetables for a children's garden, a shady spot, an ornamental food garden, challenging soils, and highest yields.

This book, which is illustrated with 79 color photographs, has real value for gardeners who struggle with that annual question, “What should I grow?” It will be a useful tool long before the season commences and help readers ensure that each gardening investment is a good one.

—Barbara W. Ellis

Barbara W. Ellis is the author of Chesapeake Gardening & Landscaping (University of North Carolina Press) and The Veggie Gardener's Answer Book (Storey Publishing).