

On eating dirt

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SINCE BECOMING A MOTHER, I've spent a fair amount of time thinking about dirt. It was only then that I found out, from more experienced moms, that children are expected to eat dirt (quite a lot of it actually – a reasonable estimate of children's dirt eating is about 200 mg/day during the peak dirt-gobbling stage, between 2 and 7-years-old. That works out to a total dirt input of about 1/3 of a kilo, or 3/4 of a pound, during those 5 years). So, when a pacifier goes down on the playground or a graham cracker slips off the plate and onto the floor, knowing parents pick up whatever has fallen in the dirt, blow on it briefly, and put it back into play (usually directly into the child's mouth...)

It turns out, in fact, that geophagy (the practice of eating dirt) is a time-honored tradition in many regions of the world, including equatorial Africa and parts of the southern United States. It happened in antiquity, and it is still practiced today. People actually mold certain kinds of clay into egg-shaped mounds, smoke them in ovens, and sell them in the market.

According to conventional wisdom, pregnant women and children are the most common consumers of dirt. Scholars say that geophagists (soil eaters) engage in "pica," the practice of eating non-food substances, in order to make up for mineral deficiencies in their diet. Jared Diamond, author of *Guns, Germs and Steel*, takes thinking about eating dirt to a higher level. He theorizes that clay eating is evolution in action. Studies show that parrots, for example, eat dirt partly to neutralize plant toxins present in seeds and unripe fruit, enabling the colorful birds to lunch on plants that produce these toxins. Thanks to geophagy, parrots out-compete creatures that haven't figured out how to detoxify marginal food sources as effectively, giving Polly an edge in the eternal struggle for survival.

Dirt might just be vastly more important to our survival than any of us thought, in ways we might not have imagined. One theory (of special interest to geophagy-tolerant mothers), the "hygiene hypothesis", states that lack of dirt in our everyday lives may be responsible for the sharp increases in allergies reported in recent decades. Researchers are now investigating how our modern love of dust-free, spic'n'span houses may rob us of our ability to fight off the little bits of this and that we have tolerated for eons without experiencing itchy eyes or a runny nose.

Meanwhile, how do dirt eaters themselves (the grown-up ones, anyway) explain why they do it? Simple. It makes them feel better.

"More than I wanted to know," my daughter would respond to such information. But I believe all this bears some consideration.



Illustration by NATALIA MOROZ

Think about it. Food that grows in dirt is, essentially, a medium of exchange between the eater (you and me) and the seed, sun, water, air and - most obviously - the dirt itself. In very refined form - as a carrot or a green bean - we all eat dirt.

Deep down, gardeners understand this. Fertile soil and the right amount of water are fundamentals; without them, gardening just does not work. Now, if we'd only take care of our soil as if we were going to eat it, we wouldn't face our current regrettable state of affairs vis-à-vis soil and water conservation. Half the topsoil in North America is depleted, after just a few centuries of our particular style of farming. Every year, unthinkably huge quantities of our soil are lofted into the air or deposited in rivers, lakes and oceans.

There are ways to follow Gandhi's maxim to "be the change" in regard to soil and water conservation. In a perfect world, perhaps within our lifetimes, every community will see the profound benefit of converting food waste back into organic fertilizer, for use growing local and better-tasting food. All around North America, community gardeners are catching the wave of soil and water conservation and doing it in ways that are attractive and cost-effective.

So what do parrots and mothers have in common? Inscrutable wisdom, of course. And what about dirt? Treat it as though you are going to eat it, because you are going to eat it: if not directly like the alpha parrot, or tastefully mixed with graham cracker crumbs like your toddler, then indirectly in your salad and stir fry. It's a simple matter of survival. 🗑️