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Introduction

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HUMAN HEALTH STARTS IN THE SOIL

He who owns land possesses the greatest potential to live the longest life, for he has the ability to grow his own food and determine the ultimate control of his health, thus, his destiny.

-Milo

What is vital for life? Your health. The future of your health is imminent. To live a long life full of joy and vitality, your lifestyle choices today determine the state of your health tomorrow. This is true, whether we think about those choices or let ignorance and apathy make them for us.

The great news is you control your own destiny, because you control every decision in your life. Healthy eating and living are personal life choices. In your own backyard you can find the potential to create a future of good health for yourself, your family and the entire planet. This is the start of your journey to a better life.

To create an environment that nurtures you and provides you with enjoyment and health, you need a detailed plan similar to a road map. My mission is to help you plan and take this wondrous journey.

Being healthy is simple if you understand how to garden in your own backyard. Growing your own healthy food right outside your door will make you look at your home in a new, wonderful way. With so much excitement running through your veins, your enthusiasm may push you to act too soon. Before you grab a piece of paper, scribble many ideas, run down to your local plant nursery, and buy as many seeds, plants, soils and fertilizers as you can load up, let me guide you from my 20 years of experience and leadership in gardening. I want to teach you what I know that is true and effective.

Let's Get Dirty First!

Some people think of soil as nothing more than an anchor that holds plants in the ground, a dark, dusty place that critters crawl in that makes our hands dirty. Soil is not just “dirt” but the basis of all life. Healthy soil is alive with billions of microbes that feed all living things on our planet. Your body needs it to be healthy. It provides you with the sustenance you need to generate the energy for everything you do. Everyone who is alive today and everyone who ever lived, needed the benefits of soil to survive and prosper.

Soil health is the fundamental basis for the health of all plants, animals and people. This book shows you the link between soil and human health. The connection is simple: Healthy soil creates a healthy garden, which produces healthy plants to provide nutrients for us, for the animals we love and care for as pets, as well as the plants we consume as food.

Why should you grow a vegetable garden? Food is so cheap and easily accessible if you live in a modernized country. Much of what we can buy is more convenient to prepare than cooking garden produce from scratch. I can run down to a fast food drive-through and grab a value meal (for about \$5) that is 2,500 calories of deep fried, grease-laden, processed food. You can get your fill of genetically modified, processed meat and potatoes for far less than one-tenth of a penny per calorie.

Maybe you do not care if that hamburger came from a cow fed with genetically modified grains and was shipped 2,500 miles to get to you. Maybe you believe it makes no difference if your fries are processed and grown with genetically modified potatoes. Your 32-ounce soda was full of simple sugars that went down smoothly with those salty fries.

Is a bargain meal a bargain if you pay for it with your health?

Why you should garden: It's good for your health. Besides giving you the best nutrients you can get, gardening is healthy work. You have to cultivate the soil, amend it, plant seeds or cuttings, fertilize, water, weed and mulch. Finally, you must harvest and preserve your crop for future use. Is eating healthy from your own garden worth all that effort? Yes!

If you read this book with an open mind and the attitude of caring about your health, the health of others and the well-being of our only home—the good earth itself—it will open your eyes to the importance of creating your healthy backyard garden. You will learn why eating food you nurture and harvest yourself is one of the most rewarding things you can do.

This book is also unique in taking the approach of starting from the ground up, explaining how human health begins in the soil, then providing clear examples of what to grow, how to grow it, and the nutritional benefits to you and your family, your friends and your community.

I know thousands of gardeners and have interviewed hundreds of them over the past 20 years. I have also met with many medical doctors, soil scientists, plant biologists, nutritionists and master gardeners. All this involvement and research has more than convinced me that a healthy garden will give you joy and bounty.

I live the organic lifestyle, and it all starts in my backyard. Even the smallest thing you do will make a huge difference toward living a long and healthy life and raising a healthy family. A garden can help you to achieve these goals.

Americans are on a new journey, seeking natural and organic solutions to their health problems. People from all backgrounds are on a personal quest to be healthy while making the right environmental decisions in the process.

I hope this book will inspire you and benefit you in the same way.

Chapter 1

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YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT. THE GIFT OF HEALTH

Forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair.

-Kahlil Gibran

Every fiber that makes up the human body was once a biological or elemental part of the soil, air and water. We have heard the saying from the Bible, “Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” We come from the earth. We live off the earth. We return to the earth. The food we eat is inextricably linked to soil particles that existed millions of years ago. What you eat today is part of a food chain that was here before our species walked the earth.

Eating can be such an arbitrary act, simply a way to fill your stomach. Or you can eat consciously, with awareness, and insist that everything you allow into your body must be healthy and pure. When you intentionally choose healthy food, eating becomes more than a practical action to sustain your physical body. It becomes a lifestyle, a way of being in the world, an expression of your desire and choice to live longer and healthier. The only one way you can have ultimate control of that decision is to nurture the soil and then grow your own food in that soil. This is the basis of healthy living.

The large corporations that control most of our food supply and our farmland are set up to produce large quantities of food while making huge commercial profits. Sadly for the health of our nation, the quality of that food has been left far behind. And the quality of the food we eat, its ability to nourish us and sustain our health, rests simply on the quality of our soil.

The health and balance of our ecosystem also depends on the vitality of our soil. (Notice that word vitality. My dictionary defines it as “of or manifesting life.” It comes from the Latin word *vita*, which means “life.”) “Vital soil” has life in it and gives life to everything that grows in it.

Humans and animals depend on the health of the soil. Along with the other ancient elements (air, water and fire), earth-soil is the main thing supplying our plants with the sustenance they need to properly develop into naturally thriving, insect-resistant, nutrient-packed produce. When we eat a piece of a living plant that came out of living soil, our body draws out the life from it (nutrients) we need to stay alive. Looking at this life process in reverse, we stay alive by extracting the life from living plants that depend on “lively” soil.

As part of the movement to gain more life and health from our food, many people over the past 15 to 20 years have tried to buy or grow organic food. Organic has finally become mainstream. We see the number of organic goods multiply in stores, ranging from foods and clothing to household items and cosmetics. It’s cool to be organic!

Many high-profile celebrities and activists support this movement. They have fostered a more positive image through their association with green goods. For many large companies, the term organic is part of successful marketing strategies. Malcomb Cork, president of Commerce Corporation, has said, “We are witnessing a national movement. Green goods are on Main Street, and they are here to stay.” Tom Medhurst, President of L&L Nursery Supply, told me recently, “Just 10 years ago, you really had to convince many nurseries that organic products are the future. Today, we have to make sure we are constantly in stock.”

Commercial agriculture supplies our grocery stores with all the produce we can imagine, organic or not. Some is grown locally, some on the other side of the nation, or even imported from other continents. The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition says that much of our produce travels 1,500 to 2,500 miles to arrive at our tables. Aggressive marketing and efficient transportation networks enable us to eat fruits and vegetables from all over the world all year round. (If you’re willing to pay the price, you can eat summer fruit from the Southern Hemisphere in the dead of winter in the frozen North.)

If you want to eat organic food, do you need to care about certification? A careful consumer may ask, “What gives a farming operation the ability to say they’re organic? How does that change the treatment of their food? Does it matter if it is organic as long as it is healthy and does not contain chemical residues?”

What makes gardening for personal use organic is somewhat ambiguous for those of us growing our own produce. In essence, there are no policies or rules for home gardeners. We have no manual to follow. Our instinctive compass must guide us. If what we grow seems healthy and good enough for our bodies, we are generally free to grow it. Home growers have freedom of action but need to

understand what they are doing and the probable consequences. Many prospective organic gardeners agree on the need to avoid synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, herbicides and genetically modified organisms. Beyond those popular conventions, we find a variety of gardening strategies. Some people take it to the extreme, believing that to be organic, a plant must not receive any type of nutritive treatment other than what is naturally found at hand. Others, slightly more involved, treat the soil and feed the foliage only certified organic materials.

For your growing and mine, this is not needed. If you use your neighbor's leaf litter as compost and are positive they don't apply any chemicals to their soil or plants, you don't need to worry about the quality of the leaf litter. Certification is more important to commercial growers who must prove they are growing by accepted public standards or a set of rules in order to truthfully label their produce organic. For the home gardener, certified is a useless term.

However, if you do not understand the techniques of organic practices, you cannot claim to know the effect your plants have on people, pets, children, health or the surrounding environment. Before you assert, "Organic is good," you should understand how and why. Otherwise, you may easily fall into the trap of believing, and paying to consume, someone's deceitful marketing scheme.

Organic gardening, growing and farming are all highly beneficial. The benefits, however, depend on the organic methods you use. Many who practice organic growing techniques want to conserve the beautiful biological diversity on our planet, while giving people and animals the resources they need to enjoy a comfortable, healthy life. However, some organic practices (discussed later) are not necessarily beneficial to people, animals or the environment. Saying "Natural is good" is too simple, as are claims that synthetic pesticide or weed control is good. We must understand the effects of our treatments before using them, so that we can properly apply them to gain the benefits while avoiding their adverse effects.

Whether planning quaint home gardening projects or large plantations, we must focus our energy on nurturing the soil, which serves as the basis for healthy sustainable growth. Look deeply into your particular situation to understand how and why the practices you choose meet your needs while protecting yourself and your soil.

I grow as much of my own food as I can. The rest I buy from my local farmers market and a good local produce market that stocks organic produce. Only when I buy produce from a market that the word certified matters to me. I know what I do in my backyard is healthy and pure. This is why it is so important to grow your own just as humans first did long ago.