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The Dark Side of Dirt

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Dirt. To many people, that dark, desolate place, made up of rocks, sand, bugs and other undesirable critters. Dirt. Not the stuff you buy at garden supply stores; that stuff is not dirt at all, just a mixture of composted organic materials. No, I mean just plain old dirt. You know, that stuff you walk on, that your house is built on, or possibly made of; that stuff we bury our trash in, spray with herbicides and other poisons, pave over, and cover with endless lawns, sport complexes, amusement parks or golf courses, and never seem able to find a reason not to dig up or disturb for yet another improvement to the landscape.

Yes, that stuff, the substance that took billions of years of continent building, oceans, erosion, floods, fires, earthquakes and the death of trillions of organisms to become the material we need to maintain life as we know it. It contains remnants of the dinosaurs, great forests, ice ages and even materials from stars that went supernova before our planet or sun even formed.

Dirt is the sum total of everything that came before us. Sadly, it is the least explored place on earth. It is just there. We take it for granted, rarely thinking about how harming it could lead to harming ourselves. Yeah, DIRT, the stuff that is also directly or indirectly responsible for providing 99.9% of our food, medicines and clothing.

Now, here is a dirty little secret that you may not know: IT'S ALIVE! Not just with ants, earthworms and all the other creepy crawly things we associate with dirt. Far from being a dead place, the earth below your feet is a lively, vibrant ecosystem that contains a rich mixture of organic material that comes from decayed plants, animal matter, particles of rock, minerals,

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water, air, earthworms, nematodes, ants, spiders, and plant roots. In addition, it contains millions of microorganisms such as algae, fungi, bacteria and protozoa. A single teaspoon of soil can have up to billion bacteria, several yards of fungal filaments, several thousand protozoa, and scores of nematodes. There is more life below ground than above! Without these organisms and their abilities to break down the nutrients in the soil, your plants wouldn't have the ability to absorb nutrients, water or any of the other elements necessary to grow.

In essence, without dirt, everything and everyone dies. So the next time you look at your yard or garden, a farmer's field or an orchard, or perhaps think about dumping something on the ground that really should not be there, think about how important what you are walking on is to our continued existence, and may that thought move you to treat it with gratitude and respect.

On Saturday, September 14, from 8-10 a.m., Master Gardeners of El Dorado County will be holding their Second Saturday Open Garden Day at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville. Staff will be on hand to discuss planting onions, garlic and shallots. Also, the Succulent Garden will be open for questions and plant diagnosis.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512), or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information and days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.