



The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture

Albert Howard

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During his years as a scientist working for the British government in India, Sir Albert Howard conceived of and refined the principles of organic agriculture. Howard's *The Soil and Health* became a seminal and inspirational text in the organic movement soon after its publication in 1945. *The Soil and Health* argues that industrial agriculture, emergent in Howard's era and dominant today, disrupts the delicate balance of nature and irrevocably robs the soil of its fertility. Howard's classic treatise links the burgeoning health crises facing crops, livestock, and humanity to this radical degradation of the Earth's soil. His message -- that we must respect and restore the health of the soil for the benefit of future generations -- still resonates among those who are concerned about the effects of chemically enhanced agriculture.

The Soil and Health: A Study of Organic Agriculture Details

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Brian says

Entertainment-0 Stars
Education- 1 Star
Readability- 0 star
Innovation- 1 Stars
Inspiration- .5 Star

This thing was pretty hard to read (not to pick on a dead guy). I read a LOT of non fiction and this was definitely a slog. If I were actually building a compost heap and growing food, it would probably be somewhat relevant to my life. It was not without it's merits though. I learned a lot (mainly about dirt and the history of organic farming, and farming in general). There are some great insights about why chemical farming sucks. Sure it works for a while, but we would be much better off to mimic how nature works. That seems to have been around a while and appears to work pretty well. Tough to make a buck off it though. Maybe I should join up with the Amish, I bet they are organic. No hat for me though (they look kind of goofy).

Kristi says

A classic work on the importance of soil health and compost for the state of our agricultural systems. A little wordy, and for those educated in the science of organic agriculture and composting, it will also seem a little elementary at times. Yet embedded in this work are many gems of wisdom and great reminders about the vital importance of caring for the "green carpet" on planet Earth.

Scott says

A corner-stone book in organic agriculture, this book should complete the theoretical background of my reading so that I can move on to the practical stuff related to becoming a farmer!

Well, the book served the above purpose. But it was slow and sort of disappointing. On one hand, the principles articulated in the book will likely serve the foundation for any farming/gardening I do for the rest of my life and on the other hand, I struggled through it and didn't even quite finish it yet (but I am putting it down b/c it's stopping me from reading anything else). I'll save you the trouble: Use Compost! It needs to have animal and plant "waste" and fertilizing with it is the key to overcoming both disease and pests in plants. Healthy plants make healthy animals make healthy humans. Done.

Mark says

Sir Albert Howard is probably a name that most of us are not or have not been familiar with. However, he is an early progenitor of the now “modern” locovore movement that is thankfully growing throughout the country. *The Soil and Health* is a collection of notes taken by Howard early last century as he studied the effects of compost and manure on farming. The gist of the book can be summed up in a single quote: “Howard’s fundamental assumption was that the processes of agriculture, if they are to endure, have to be analogous to the processes of nature.”

Howard’s book is not limited to true, organic agriculture (rather than the ‘new and improved’ corporate definition of “organic”), but also to social and cultural consequences of such agriculture. He writes, “The most important possession of a country is its population. If this is maintained in health and vigour everything else will follow...” Of course, to maintain “health and vigour” we must follow the lead of nature in our agricultural endeavors.

Howard’s studies were mainly based in India, but did spread to other countries, and according to his book the consequences of compost and manure-based agriculture were the same over a period of some twenty years: better food, better health, and happier people and animals.

Like so many “modern” movements Howard’s book reminds us that most are only new because we have strayed so far from the virtuous path. I would recommend this read for anyone who doubts the difference between qualities of food and the consequences of their choices, and the sustainability of true, organic farming.

Jonathan says

Sir Albert Howard wrote *On Soil and Health* to sum up a lifetime of work and advocacy in favor of a type of agriculture which focuses on the health and the sustainability on which the agriculture depends. I read it due to a note in Wendell Berry about Howard’s profound influence on him, as well as Howard’s background as an agricultural scientist, as well as his background farming successfully in India.

There are many aspects of this book, from an autobiographical section detailing Howard’s growth in understanding the science of farming, to a breakdown of the important issues of health and disease (as he sees it) in soil, plants, animals and humans, to his description of the development of “agricultural science” and what he sees as having gone wrong in that field, to descriptions of farmers around the world who are doing it right as he sees it. Yet all of that diverse background is focused extremely clearly on a single thesis. The primary way, far and above all other methods and factors, to ensure good health in food products is to start from the most natural, well-composted, humus-rich soil possible, absent to whatever degree possible of the dependence on artificial fertilizers and focused disease-fighting techniques. Nature, when healthy, is very good at fighting disease and producing amazing produce on her own. If we give our crops a rich, well-drained, well-aerated humus built from comprehensive animal-and-plant-based composting, and plant the crops which are right for our land in the well-rotating, mixed-crop manner which nature does, with the strong roles played by both trees and animals that are always there in nature as well, then we’ll get the absolute best

products, for both our own health and the health of the farm.

SARAH says

Sir Albert was organic when organic wasn't cool. Take that, Michael Pollan!

Also he exploited colonial British land and labor for his agricultural experiments. It's fun to start a movement when it's on the backs of Indian farmers.
