

Putting “Earth” in Earth Day

By Kathleen Cue, Nebraska Extension Horticulture Educator in Dodge County

The first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970 to celebrate all things plant, water, and air. What’s not celebrated is that unsung hero—earth—not in reference to our planet, but earth, the stuff we plant in. Otherwise known as soil, dirt, land, and loam, earth supports most plant life on planet Earth. Yet earth is little appreciated and vastly underrated. David R. Montgomery, author of *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilization*, tells us “Societies that don’t take care of their land don’t last.” In his book, Montgomery documents time and again civilizations no longer able to feed themselves because of loss of soil fertility and erosion.

Gardeners the world over know when they’ve got challenging soil conditions. Words like “muck,” “hardpan,” and “gumbo” are some things said about less-than-ideal soils. Removing topsoil during construction; soil erosion from grade changes and loss of protective vegetation; cultivating soil to a powder-like consistency; bagging grass clippings instead of mulching them in; and adding things that don’t belong there (like landscaping fabric, excess fertilizer, and petroleum products) are just some of the ways our current practices destroy the recuperative potential of soil.

Additions of organic matter, whether its grass clippings, composted kitchen scraps or well-aged manure, add to the carbon content of soils, making them darker in appearance and providing a necessary component of plant photosynthesis. Organic matter loosens dense clay soils and increases water-holding capacity of sandy soils. Water droplets—from irrigation and rainfall—damage unprotected soils by loosening soil structure, leading to erosion. Mulches and plants protect soils from the damaging effects of water droplets.

Think destructive practices only hurt soils and nothing else? Not so. Soil is a substrate, supporting plant roots and thus stabilizing plants. Soil is one of the most diverse biomes on earth, with beneficial macroorganisms like sowbugs and millipedes and beneficial microorganisms like bacteria and fungi, breaking down organic matter and thus making nutrients readily available to plants. Just one teaspoon of soil contains thousands of living creatures and the more diversity in our soils, the greater the diversity of life supported above it.

The earth under our feet isn’t glamorous and doesn’t grab headlines. It is, however, essential to life and worthy of our time and attention to take care of it, not just on Earth Day, but all days.