

WELfare not Warfare

I have had an astounding number of revelations over the years that I have taught horticulture, but none have been as profound as the realization that the way we have been growing things for the last 50 years or so, is wrong. We were wrong in our methodology, our philosophy and wrong with our science. It is very humbling to have to admit to the hundreds of people I have taught that I was wrong, yet I am anxious to share the lessons I have learned and to correct my mistakes.

It seems that both agriculture and horticulture have gone through many phases in my lifetime. When I was young everyone on my street had a compost pile, and everyone I knew had a garden. My parents never dreamed of spraying poison around the food we were going to eat. It seemed there was no need. My mother was careful to put a bucket of compost, a handful of bone-meal (before bone-meal was contaminated by lead) and a handful of blood-meal under every tomato plant. She planted nitrogen-loving lettuce next to nitrogen-fixing beans and watered carefully by hand. One of my fondest memories as a child was helping my parents make salsa; grinding the tomatoes, peppers, and onions we grew with a hand grinder attached to a wooden bench that my father brought into the kitchen. The onions of course, were so pungent that we would predictably cry as we were grinding away. We were a strong family and had a strong community.

Somewhere along the line, maybe the late fifties or early 60's in my town, compost piles seemed to earn the reputation of being messy, and everyone in town was under social pressure to not have one. The garden seemed to not thrive as it used to. Every year it got smaller and smaller and was finally replaced by lawn. Meanwhile, the neighbors had discovered chemical fertilizers. Although they grew giant zucchini and cucumbers they also found that they had a new battle on their hands. There seemed to be sudden invasions



of plant eating insects. I guess they figured it lucky to be able to run to the store and grab some insecticide to help them in their fight. Across the country and throughout a lot of the industrial world farmers were finding themselves in the same situation. It seemed like a wonderful solution to be able to kill the invaders in our

farms and gardens with a quick spray of poison. We never stopped to think about the far reaching consequences in both the scientific and philosophical realms. We were in the midst of a huge shift away from the harmonious co-existence with earth's micro-creatures to a full scale war to control them.

The very roots of the chemical fertilizer industry lie embedded in warfare. Large factories that had been manufacturing explosives found themselves out of business after World War II. Through the wonders of modern science and corporate lack of conscience, the same chemical substances that make bombs are chemically identical to the chemical fertilizers we use today, and the destruction that they spread is just as frightening. Yet that is the way I was originally taught how to grow things in school, and is the way I grew things as my job as a Horticulture Technician.


Mycorrhizae fungus colonize plant roots and help them break down nutrients. They also form a protective layer around the roots that protect them from disease. They seem to have a mutually beneficial relationship that is so important to plants and plants have been found to share up to 80% of the carbohydrates they manufacture with the mycorrhizae. Mycorrhizae have been known to help plants share water and nutrient resources with other plants in the same plant community. Unfortunately many of the modern horticultural practices we have been taught destroy mycorrhizae. When we fertilize with chemical fertilizers we often kill these important allies, and inhibit their growth and weaken soil and plant communities. This causes us to need to continually add fertilizer year after year to compensate for the loss



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of mycorrhizae. Another loss that occurs with chemical fertilizers is that of beneficial bacteria, which can capture nitrogen right from thin air and make it available for plants. This bacteria can supply up to a third of the plant's nitrogen needs. There are also decomposers that are present to break down organic matter. When we substitute chemical fertilization for added organic matter, we starve these organisms and the natural cycle is severely disrupted.

The soil is composed of many pieces and parts. There are living and non-living components of the soil, and each component plays an important role in providing the plants that live there with health and nourishment. Sand, gravel, silt, clay and loam are some of the non-living components, along with organic matter that is fully decomposed. The living part of healthy soil has amazing bio-diversity. There are creatures large and small that live there. In soil with good biological diversity there is a balance of creatures, and no one organism completely takes over to the detriment of the others. There are bacteria, fungi, springtails, worms, millipedes, centipedes, ground beetles, and many more. If one organism's population becomes overly large due to favorable environmental conditions, the organisms that consume them also have a population increase, which will in turn level out the first population. **It is a simple and elegant system.**

In this system each organism has a job to do. The organisms that we call pests have an important role to play in the ecosystem. Insects and diseases are the clean-up crew. They help plant families stay strong by removing plants that are genetically weak or those that have been weakened by stress from the gene pool, before they can reproduce. This process has insured the survival of the species in the wild for time immemorial. By spraying plants with pesticides instead of allowing nature to take its course, we are weakening the entire species and perpetuating our problems. The warfare system is actually working against us,

because the more we spray a weak or stressed plant to keep it alive, the more we will need to spray, not only the plant itself, but the future generations of that plant. If we focused our attention on **the welfare of the plant** we would be much better off. Instead of "shooting the messenger" insect or disease organism that is warning us that our plants need more food, water, or protection, let's provide our plants with a good, balanced diet of healthy soil, rich in organic matter. By providing proper nutrition to the soil *as well as the plant* by adding large amounts of compost and organic matter we can nurture the plant-soil community and keep pests in balance. Compost is full of organisms like the mycorrhizae that help us provide food, water, and disease protection to our plants. **If we concentrated on the welfare of our plant-soil communities** rather than warfare on the organisms that attack the weak, we would be building up much stronger communities that could resist these attacks.

As a Professional Horticulturalist as well as a backyard gardener, I am often struck by profound parallels between plant communities and human communities. It seems to me that our horticultural practices for the last 50 years have reflected the warfare mentality that we witness in our human community every evening on the news and in every newspaper we read. **I can't help but wonder what would happen if we all made the shift from concentrating on the idea of warfare to concentrating on the idea of true welfare of our human communities.** If we diverted money away from warfare and into the true welfare of our fellow humans, if we truly strived to provide good nutritious food, water and protection for the weaker members of society, and those that have been stressed by lack of resources or genetic weaknesses, **wouldn't we be much better off?**

Connie Kuramoto from Gardens on the Go offers an Organic Master Gardener Program and is available for workshops and consultations. Contact her at gardensonthego@gmail.com

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