

Chapter 1

It All Begins in the Soil

Half of our misery and weakness derives from the fact that we have broken with the soil and that we have allowed the roots that bound us to the earth to rot. We have become detached from the earth, we have abandoned her. And a man who abandons nature has begun to abandon himself.

—Pierre Van Paassen, *That Day Alone*, 1941

What is this soil, this good earth that Van Paassen accuses us of abandoning?

Go to a poet and you will have your imagination filled with pictures of the soil as the giver of life: Mother Earth, the patient, forgiving, and generous bearer of us all. Choosing a favorite poetic passage about the earth is as difficult as choosing the most perfect flower in the world. But who can resist John Milton's tribute?

Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,
With charm of earliest birds; pleasant the sun
When first on this delightful land he spreads
His orient beams, on herb, tree, fruit, and flower,
Glist'ring with dew; fragrant the fertile earth
After soft showers; and sweet the coming on
Of grateful ev'ning mild, then silent night
With this her solemn bird, and this fair moon,
And these the gems of heaven, her starry train.

Paradise Lost, 4:641–49

Go to a Michigan geologist and you will get quite a different picture. He or she will talk of residual soils and transported soils, and bouldery sand, and glacial gravel, and stratified clay. He will tell you how modern alluvium was laid down by rivers, how soils were formed by the movements of enormous glaciers during the last ice age, how valleys were formed by the land's erosion by the action of water. A geologist can

give you the history of the land by studying its base and would have no trouble giving you the history of your own garden soil, no matter where in Michigan you live. Geologists are interesting people. They can instill in us a respect for the land by giving us its history.

Go to a soil scientist and he or she will tell her own story of soil. She will speak of silt loams, red clays, and green sands. She will discuss soil texture and water-holding capacities. She will bring out profile charts and point to A1 horizons and A2 horizons. She will bring out multicolored soil maps and will be able to tell you more about your soil than you ever knew before. She will slap a label on your garden soil, because soil scientists are compelled to attach labels.

Ask a farmer about the soil and he will most likely speak of productivity. For him, the soil is a way to make a living. And, sad to say, many farmers today see the soil as little more than that. Whereas farming was, not that long ago, a way of life for a large segment of America, it has gradually and surely followed a clear trend: fewer and larger farms, more crop specialization, intense emphasis on yield rather than quality, increasing dependence on chemicals for land and crop management, and a widening separation of the farmer from the land that supports him. This trend has led us from traditional farming to modern agribusiness and corporate enterprise. Respect for the soil is lost, here, in deference to the greater respect for