

GRAB BAG

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Grounds for success: a revolution in dirt

With quarrelsome domestic politics, international saber-rattling, natural calamities and humanitarian disasters, there's plenty of doom and gloom to go around these days — but then along comes David R. Montgomery, bless him, with news of a hopeful sort.

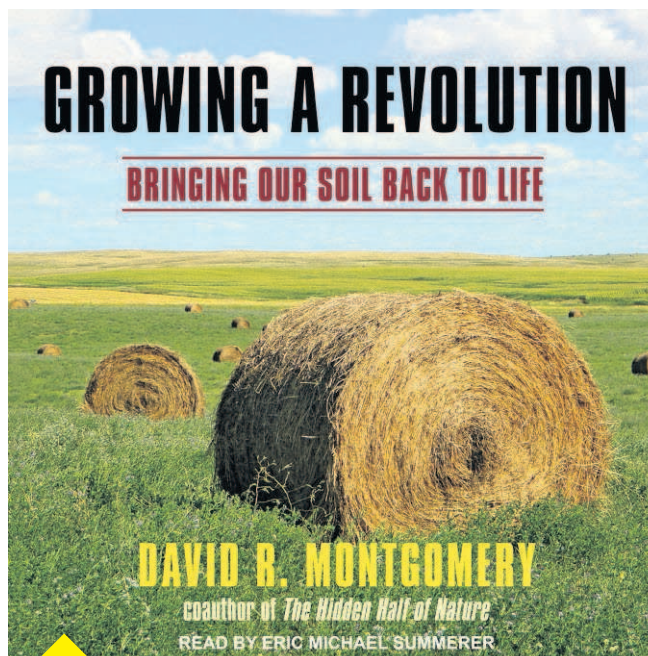
Montgomery is a University of Washington geomorphology professor and recipient of a 2008 MacArthur Fellowship, popularly known as the “genius grant.” Fortunately for us, some of Montgomery's genius lies in his ability to make the stuff of his studies — rocks and dirt — compelling to the average Joe.

A book he wrote a decade ago, “Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations,”

revealed how conventional agricultural practices were devastating cropland around the world. It was a transfixing and deeply dismaying read.

But since then, Montgomery has been seeking solutions to this problem of soil depletion. He found some of them in his wife's home garden, and with her he co-wrote the book “The Hidden Half of Nature” to reveal their discoveries.

Now with his latest book, “Growing a Revolution,” he's moved his focus from backyard to farm — in fact, to farms all over the world — to report on common-sense practices that farmers are adopting to rebuild soil and ensure the continuing productivity of their farms.



“Growing a Revolution”
By David R. Montgomery
Norton
320 pp
\$26.95

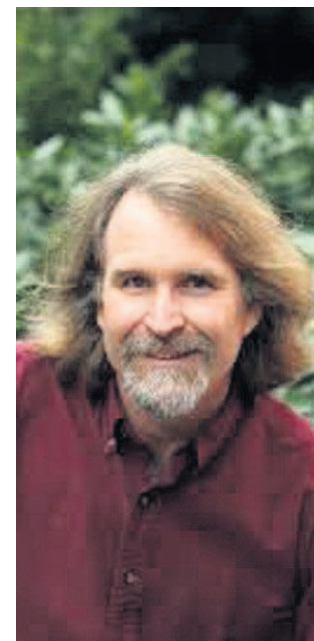
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In early chapters, Montgomery begins to dispel some long-held misconceptions about conventional agriculture: Large farms are not more efficient than small farms, chemical fertilizers aren't essential to boosting crop production, and industrialized food production is perhaps not the

future of agriculture.

Montgomery visits farmers who have ditched conventional farming methods, but whose crop yields are better than ever. They may work on different-sized farming operations, in different soils, in different climates, and with different crops, but they have adopted some of the same practices.

First, they have switched to no-till agriculture, relinquishing the plow for



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David R. Montgomery

less-intrusive methods of replanting. In addition, they plant cover crops to hold the soil, reduce invasive weeds and allow continued percolation.

They also increase the diversity of crops they grow. This eliminates the risk of mono-crop failure, and also allows plants to work their synergetic magic underground in a myriad of natural biological processes. These practices make for happy earthworms and

microorganisms, whose activity allows plants to make use of the air and moisture brought into the soil.

As one farmer put it, “It's not that I don't have any livestock, it's that mine are microscopic.”

Montgomery points out that these regenerative practices lead to “organic-ish,” if not entirely organic farming. And as for the bottom line: Crop yields go up significantly while input costs (for fertilizers, herbicides and fuel for farm equipment) go down. It's clearly a win-win.

So what's keeping all farmers from embracing these practices? Old ways die hard, particularly when well-heeled agribusinesses that profit from the status quo prop up government policies and ag schools that promote conventional farming.

Let's make sure common sense has its day. Read this book, spread the word, and help bring soil back to life!

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at bkmonger@nwlinc.com.

Crossword Answer

A	T	T	R	A	C	T	C	O	R	S	E	T	P	R	E	D	A	T	E		
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4pm-6pm and
8:30-Close