

WHY?

If you have a squeamish disposition you had better stop reading this now.

Queen Victoria, on being informed that she shared a common ancestry with a monkey, is reported to have been “not amused”. She would have been even less amused had she learned that she had ten times as many bacteria in her body as human cells. And what goes for queens goes for the rest of us. Yes, the boffins have been at it again and have calculated the number of bacteria we are carrying around at about 100 trillion, that’s a 100 million million million or 100,000,000,000,000,000 or 10^{20} . That’s quite a lot. Most of them are in our stomachs and small intestines where they do a great job in helping us to digest our food. There are probably 180 species on the skins of our upper arms and hundreds of species in the large intestine. They are everywhere. There is no point in trying to wash them off – we need them. We humans are perambulating ecosystems. We depend on them and they depend on us. So we have to keep them happy. We have to feed them with what they need or there will be trouble. Which brings me round to modern diets, something I have touched upon in earlier articles.

About 2% of the food we eat in the UK is organic. That means that 98% is not organic and contains all manner of residues from pesticides, herbicides, fertilisers and possibly hormones. The long-term effects of consuming these chemicals are not known, nor are the effects of consuming cocktails of these chemicals. So our 10^{20} bacteria are at risk.

Now back to the title of this article, “Why?”. Why do we lucky few grow our own vegetables and fruit in our gardens and on our allotments? Apart from the monetary aspect and the great benefit of eating really fresh food, there is the possibility of eating **truly organic** food. Food sold under the organic label in shops can have been sprayed by up to seven different chemicals by the farmer and still meet “organic” criteria. United States regulations permit 38 different synthetic materials to be included in organic food and for the food still to carry the “organic” label. The proportion of synthetic material can rise as high as 5%. As for genetically-modified organisms (GMOs), the EU regulation states that crops can still retain the “organic” label even if they contain genetically-modified material – so long as the proportion of genetically-modified material does not exceed 0.9%. That may be being realistic but it makes a mockery of the label “organic” as something supposedly wholesome and pure.

The average person in western Europe carries at least 30 man-made chemicals in his or her body. Isn’t that horrifying? We did not intend to ingest those chemicals and we certainly did not vote for them. By growing our own food we can attempt to avoid those 30 chemicals - to protect ourselves and our 10^{20} bacteria. But also, we can tackle an even more fundamental problem – nutrition.

It has been estimated that one third of the people in the UK are suffering from malnutrition. It could be one third of the readers of this article. I hope it isn’t me. It is very difficult to detect when someone is suffering from malnutrition, but when one goes down with a recognised medical complaint it could be found, only at that point, that malnutrition was a contributory factor. Severe deficiency of vitamins or trace elements can lead to specific complaints, such as children being born to iodine-deficient mothers often having a low IQ. The cost to the NHS in the UK of dealing with poor dietary habits is £6 billion each year – much higher than the annual cost of smoking which is put at £1.5 billion. One of my personal pet theories, with so many overweight people around, is that they are not finding adequate amounts of vitamins and trace elements in their food so are compensating by eating more and that is a contributory factor to the plague of galloping obesity afflicting the nation. Obesity in adults is predicted to rise by 38% between 2003 and 2010.

So, in our gardens and on our allotments, how can we improve the situation with regard to nutrition? Initially, our soil may be impoverished. British farmland has lost about 40% of its trace elements since the Second World War, probably because trace elements have been taken up by the crops and not fully replaced by the return of compost and manure. Between 1980 and 1995 the percentage of soils classed as low in organic matter in the UK rose from 35 to 42 %, mainly because of the overuse

of fertilisers and pesticides and the failure to apply enough compost and manure. Our gardens and allotments may have been farmland or may be impoverished for other reasons. The answer, therefore, is to ask a local farmer to deliver large quantities of farmyard manure every year and then to apply it progressively around our vegetable and fruit plots so that, after say three years, all areas have been covered and the first areas can be covered again in the fourth year. What this means is that the precious trace elements from the farmer's fields will be imported into our gardens and allotments together with humus to improve our soil so that our plants can thrive – and contain plenty of trace elements for ourselves and our 10^{20} dependants.

Of course, by looking after number one in this way we are being rather selfish. What about the rest of the population who eat supermarket food? All we can do is to draw their attention to the problem in the hope that public pressure will, one day, force the politicians to do something about the situation. Pass this article on!

So, now that you have read this article, why not eat a nice juicy and hopefully **truly organic** apple, and think of the 10^{20} mouths you have to feed. Perhaps you have never thought of yourself as one huge perambulating ecosystem!

MIKE MASON