

Dirty, but essential

by Sabine Eiche

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Water, fire, air and earth – ancient philosophers considered these the four elements on which all terrestrial life is based. Aristotle added a fifth element – ether – which was celestial, breathed by the gods as we mortals breathe air. Ether became known as the quintessence – from the Latin “quinta essentia,” fifth essence. In English we still use the word quintessence, not referring to ether but rather to the most perfect manifestation of some quality, a meaning it had acquired by the 16th century.

Hydrologists, pyrologists and aerologists (and philosophers) may disagree with me, but I think earth is the most complex, most diverse of the four elements. One way I measure its complexity or diversity is by the impressive list of words associated with earth.

We call our planet earth, which derives from the Old English “eorde,” meaning ground, soil (related is the German “Erde”). In Latin the earth is “terra,” from which we derive words such as terrain, terrestrial, terrace.

Imagine our planet sliced in half to reveal its internal composition. The outermost layer – the crust – is what we walk on and where vegetation grows. We call it the ground, a word from the Old English “grund,” signifying bottom, foundation, or the earth’s surface (it’s so fundamental a concept that ground is the word for reason, motive as well, the same as the related German “Grund”).

Soil is another term for the earth’s surface. It derives from the Latin “solum,” the word for soil, country, land. “Solum” refers also to the bottom part of anything, the sense embodied by our word sole – of the foot or shoe.

Soil is composed of distinct substances, giving it its specific character or quality. These can include sand (from the Old English “sand”), tiny fragments of rock containing silica, an

important mineral substance; silt (from a Scandinavian word for sediment deposited by seawater), referring to fine sand; and clay (from the Old English “clæg,” sticky earth). When it is made of clay, sand and decomposed vegetation the soil is called loam (from the Old English “lam,” meaning clay, mud, mire).

To enrich our garden soil we add compost (ultimately from the Latin “componere,” to put together), which in the 16th century referred to prepared manure. Before there were gardeners, nature made the soil fertile with humus, which is plant and animal material left to decay in the ground. “Humus” is a Latin word for soil, earth, related to “humilis,” meaning low, which is the source for the English humble, humility.

Soil is never the same in any two places. Its characteristics depend on not only what is below (subsoil, parent material, bedrock) but also what enters from above (humus). Once you begin gardening and working the soil with your hands, you realize it is something magnificent and essential. And once you observe an earthworm suddenly emerge from the soil you realize that the pejorative sense of the adjectives soiled and dirty is undeserved – because the earthworm looks as clean as a newly peeled egg.