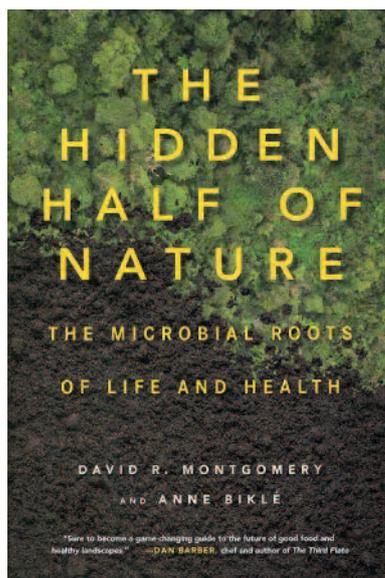


already in the text. One other gripe is the use of American English, even though it is published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, so the preceding criticism should have read 'color versions'!

So what is there for the forester and tree enthusiast in Britain? It can be summed up by saying that *Plant Ecology in the Middle East* helps us appreciate far better the land, landscape and vegetation in a region so much in the media for all the wrong reasons. If you are interested in Middle Eastern countryside and why it is what it is like, this is an excellent book to have.

Julian Evans

The Hidden Half of Nature – The microbial roots of life and health



by
**David Montgomery
and Anne Biklé**

**W.W. Norton &
Company, 2015**

Price: £18.99
ISBN: 978 0 393 24440 3

There is increasing awareness that the world we see, inhabit and try to control, is underpinned by populations of trillions of microbes (the microbiome) that we cannot see and largely do not understand. The medical profession is struggling with the complexity of the microbiome contained in the human gut, upon which our health depends and which can be inadvertently significantly damaged by use of antibiotics.

The agricultural industry is becoming aware not only of the damage caused by exhaustion of nutrients in soils, temporarily masked by industrial scale application of macro nutrients; but also the unknown damage to the microbiome of the soil upon which defence against disease depends.

Recently published, *The Hidden Half of Nature* by David

Montgomery (Professor of Earth and Space Sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle) and Anne Biklé (biologist) is a seminal, illuminating and eminently readable book, starting with the microbiome of the soil; but later linking to the microbiome of the gut:

“The botanical world fed itself long before we came along.”

“When microorganisms decompose dead plants and animals, they put life’s elemental building blocks back into circulation, including the big three – nitrogen, potassium and phosphorus – and all the other major nutrients and assorted micronutrients important for plant health. Moreover, microbes deliver nutrients right back to where they are needed – a plant’s roots.”

“The man who saved France’s wine and vinegar industries with his discovery of the secret power of bacteria also helped revolutionise the medical view of microbes.”

“Awed by the realisation that the animals, plants and landscapes we see around us are merely the visible tip of nature’s iceberg, we now appreciate how the mysterious world of microbes helps make soil fertile and food nutritious. We had thought most microbes were harmful, foes to our immune system and to be vanquished by antibiotics.”

This book may not be an obvious read for a forester; but what affects agriculture affects forestry, albeit that we have, in this case, the benefit of much longer harvest cycles. We may still have the opportunity to avoid the mistakes of agriculture. Our ‘unmanaged’ woodlands may be our saviour. We should not rush to ‘manage’ them until the rapidly evolving science gives us a better understanding of the microbial underpinning and the pragmatic steps we should take in the meantime to avoid unintentional damage.

Patrick Mannix

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