



Episode 310: Can Our Soils Heal Us? How Regenerative Agriculture and Home Gardens Can Improve Our Health

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Katie: Hello and welcome to the Wellness Mama Podcast. I'm Katie from [wellnessmama.com](https://wellnessmama.com). And this episode is all about regenerative agriculture and actually how that translates even to a home garden, and how by using certain principles, you can make your home garden easier, less upkeep, and create more nutrient-dense food in your own yard.

I'm here with Leah Webb who has worked in nutrition and gardening since 2009 with a focus on engaging children in healthy eating habits, their experiential learning and discovery. She lives in the mountains of North Carolina with her husband and two children. And her son has severe food allergies, and her daughter has cystic fibrosis which is a genetic disease impacting the lungs and the pancreas.

And she's used diet and homegrown organic foods as part of her integrative approach to caring for her children. She's the author of the grain-free, sugar-free, dairy-free family cookbook which is a comprehensive guide for families interested in gracefully implementing a whole foods diet.

And in this episode, we go deep about how you can implement some of these principles easily in your own home garden, even if you're limited on space. I know that you're gonna enjoy this episode as much as I did. So without further ado, let's join Leah. Leah, welcome. Thanks for being here.

Leah: Hey, thanks for having me, Katie.

Katie: I'm so excited for this conversation because I think it's a really timely and important one and one that's really beneficial to us especially as moms. So, to start with, can you talk a little bit about why you started placing such a high emphasis on cooking from scratch and growing as much of your own food as possible?

Leah: Yeah. So, like you mentioned, as moms, food can be a really important piece of raising healthy kids. And for me, that took on this whole new meaning after becoming mom. I have a Master's of Public Health and I've worked in health for a long time. But then, when I had my two kids, my son was born with severe food allergies and asthma, and then my daughter was born with cystic fibrosis, which is a genetic disease that impacts the lungs and pancreas. And so, here I was this healthy individual who'd spent a lot of time focusing on my own health and the health of others, I mean, doing workshops, and reaching out to different groups, and then here I was, all of a sudden, facing these medical challenges in my own household.

And so, I turned to food as a way I that could help support my kids in a better way. So this isn't the only way that I support them, but food is just one piece of their integrative care. And so, in order to best support them, what I found is that I really needed to be cooking more foods from scratch. I really needed to be in control of the ingredient list that was going into their bodies. And then when I got more into this and developed a deeper understanding of food and our food systems, what I started to realize was that there's also a lot behind how those foods are actually grown and the quality of the product as a result of those growing methods.

So, I have always gardened. My mom was a gardener, her mother was a gardener. So this is something that's been passed down for generations in my household. But it started to take on a new meaning as it wasn't just a hobby, and it wasn't just something to do outside, it wasn't just a way to offset our food budget, but it was also this way to take control of the quality of the foods that I was feeding to my kids. And so, now I have...I'm not exactly sure of how many square feet of growing space that I have, but it's somewhere around 2,000 square feet. And I do a lot of perennials, fruit trees, and then I also have a lot of annuals that I grow as well. We've got 12 laying hens. So, being able to supply my family with these foods is just another piece that I'm using to help support their health.

Katie: That makes perfect sense. And I think that's something that I think people are finally starting to really understand and there's been more information that's come out about this. But to highlight what you just said about kind of not all food being created equal. In other words, like a zucchini we grow at home could be vastly different from a zucchini from the store, for instance. And I know you've read some of those stats. But we're talking about pretty dramatic differences, right, in like nutrient depletion with a lot of commercial farming?

Leah: Yes. And that's a really interesting topic because I think that one of the things that we're absolutely sure of is that meats have a very different nutritional profile. When you're looking at meats that were conventionally raised on this confined animal feeding operations, they are fed grain, compared to animals that have access to pasture. And so, the nutritional profile for this meat, it's very clear that pasture-raised meats have a better nutritional profile. What's not quite as clear is whether or not vegetables that are grown using these different methods whether or not that does have an impact. And the reason that I say that is because...so, the USCA did release a report saying that 43 different fruits and vegetables had been shown to have lower nutritional value over the past few decades compared to the way that they used to be grown.

The exact reason for this isn't widely agreed upon. So, some people say it's because of depletion of soils, the way that we're farming, we are losing topsoil, we're using this heavy synthetic chemical fertilizers. But then, some of the arguments as well is that we're choosing varieties based on production and yield, and their ability to be transported rather than choosing varieties that are chosen for taste. So, for example, if you're talking about the zucchinis, zucchinis are actually a really tender vegetable. So, in order to transport these foods for thousands of miles to reach your plate to be transported, and then be bumped around in the grocery store, and then make it back to your house, they have to choose a variety that's gonna have a thicker skin. And so, some of our variety selection has really only focused on yield and our ability to transport rather than focusing on these other points.

But I do think that some of our need to understand this isn't even quite necessary. So, if you look at nutritionism, this is basically how we break foods down into their parts. So, when we think about the nutritional value of foods, we're thinking about the fats, proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals. But we also know that plants have phytonutrients and phytochemicals that can do things like they're antioxidants and they can be anti-carcinogens. And we don't understand what all of those compounds do. I think this is really a newer area of study. We also can't even identify what a lot of these compounds are. I mean, plants are manufacturing thousands of compounds and we've only identified a fraction of them.

So, one thing that is possible, this is one of the theories, is that plants that are grown in healthy soils are in contact with this healthy microbial population that is enabling them to produce this diversity of phytochemicals and phytonutrients. And so, when you have healthier soils, you likely have a healthier plant. So, I think that we do have this tendency to break our foods down into these parts that we understand. Yet there is this bigger picture point that whole foods have a holistic impact on the body that might not necessarily be understood.

Katie: Yeah. I think that's such an important point, and that makes so much sense. I'm so glad that we are talking about things like the soil microbiome now. And where we used to live in a farming area, I saw firsthand in our community how a lot of conventional farming happened. Especially the rotation of corn, wheat, and soybeans and how they literally kept spraying and depleting and spraying and depleting. And that soil was completely dead.

The difference between that soil and the soil in our garden, it was just really, really dramatic. And I think that's a missing piece that I'm so glad it's coming more to the mainstream and that we're talking about. And when we are looking at these different methods of farming or even just gardening, I know the term regenerative agriculture has become really like a buzz phrase right now. And so, I wanna go deep a little bit on regenerative agriculture and what that means, and what's involved, and if there are differences between that, for instance, and just organic farming. Why are we hearing more about regenerative agriculture right now?

Leah: I think the regenerative agriculture movement is just the coolest thing. Because I think for so long, we were focusing on sustainable agriculture and organic agriculture. And the principle behind sustainable is that it sustains itself. That this is a way we can farm and preserve the quality of our soils for decades to come. But the problem is that we have depleted the majority of our soils so badly that we actually need to regenerate the health of the soil. And that's where regenerative farming comes in.

And so, there are five principles in regenerative farming. These are that you are minimizing the soil disturbance, you're maximizing your crop diversity, you keep the soil covered and that means year-round, which is number four, maintaining your living roots year-round, and then integrating livestock. And if you think about it from an ecological perspective, basically, what regenerative agriculture is doing is they are taking these existing functions of the soil and ecosystems and using them to our benefit. So, what you're talking about is, when you see these conventional fields that are generally they are using monocrops, so they're planting the same things again, and again, and again. And what happens with that is that these crops are only utilizing a small range of nutrients that are available in that soil. And so, over time, that small range gets depleted.

But if you're using regenerative agriculture, you're going to be maximizing that crop diversity. You're gonna be using more than one species of crop when you use your cover crops. So, instead of just using like soybeans or alfalfa, maybe you're using a mix of 12 different things. By not tilling those soils and disturbing those soils, you're allowing the natural population of microbes of those nematodes and fungi, all of these below-ground organisms that give soil its structure and its health, you're leaving those systems undisturbed which means that the soil becomes healthier over time. You're using the natural processes that already exist in order to improve the quality of that soil.

So, regenerative is a form of agriculture or is a form of organic agriculture. But I think it's taking it one step further. So, with organic, you're only using organic-certified pesticides, and then you are trying to minimally disturb the soil. But regenerative is going one step further and saying, you know, "Let's not just sustain this over time, but let's actually improve these soils and improve our methods of organic farming so that we can have even better soil down the road."

Katie: That makes sense and that's an interesting point about tilling. I wanna talk about that a little bit more because that's something that even home gardeners just do as part of the process. And I think even for home gardeners which, in general, I think home gardens fulfill a lot more of those ideas than conventional farming.

But something that maybe even a lot of home gardeners still do. So for people who are, like, hearing that wondering is it possible to maintain good soil quality and also not to have tons of weeds if you don't till?

Leah: Yes. This is a point of a lot of confusion, and I have been running my own garden and then managing some gardens as well. I managed a learning garden when I was getting my Master's of Public Health at Georgia Southern University. And so, I have been doing gardening for like two decades. And I took my first class discussing no-till in the home garden probably 10 years ago. And the concept seemed so foreign and so inefficient that I kind of ignored it for a while and then finally committed at some point and realized that when you stop tilling, the benefits are just tremendous.

And when I'm saying no-till, I don't do anything to my soils anymore other than I have a tool called a broadfork which is a large digging spade where you can insert it into the soil and you just barely crack the surface. You are not trying to actually turn the soil, but you're just cracking the surface to aerate it. And so, this is the only disturbance that I'm doing to my soils. And what ends up happening is that as long as you're not compacting it, so I am careful to create walkways and those are my only walkways, I'm not stepping into my beds because I do want to let that soil stay fluffy.

I'm only using this broadfork to aerate the soil and not actually disturb it. And then what happens is those fungal communities remain intact, all of the nematodes that are underneath the soil, their housing structures remain intact. And the other amazing thing that happened is I have very few weeds as a result. A lot of weed seeds will kind of work their way into the soil, and then when you turn your soil you're actually turning those weed seeds up. And this was the most surprising benefit to not tilling my soils anymore, was that I have drastically reduced the amount of weeding that I'm doing.

And some of the way that I'm cutting back on that as well, is I'm using different types of mulches. So, you can use compost as a mulch, you can use different types of straw or hay. You just wanna guarantee that those things are not sprayed with an herbicide. If you do, those herbicides can live in your soil for up to three years and they can make it to where you actually can't grow certain things in that area anymore.

I also use living mulches, things like I'll plant clover underneath taller plants like tomatoes. You don't want your tomato plants, you don't want those lower leaves touching the ground. And so, I stake them and then I use the space below the tomatoes where I can put in a cover crop that I can keep trimmed. And so, that's a way to protect the soil too. Yeah. These regenerative practices, they seem counterintuitive simply because we've been tilling for thousands of years. But what we're seeing is that there are ways to work with the soil that can encourage equally as productive soil.

The other thing that I think is worth mentioning is a lot of people talk about clay and how you really need to break the clay up. And I live in an area where we have pretty old soils. I live in Western North Carolina, we have some of the oldest mountains in the United States and we have a lot of clay as a result. And so, what I do with my soils in order to improve the quality of them is that, you know, I'm sheet mulching with things like

cardboard, and dried leaves, dead sticks, compost, all of these things are building this layer of topsoil on top of the existing clay.

But then I'm using cover crops like daikon radishes that will grow really deep into the soil and they'll grow through that clay. And as that dies, it creates this hole where you now have room for water infiltration and then you have this organic matter from the dying root of the plant that's now starting to make its way deeper into the soil. So, I think that there are interesting solutions to amending whatever type of soil you have using these regenerative practices.

Katie: That's so fascinating. And I love that you brought up the fungal communities as well in the soil because this has been a research topic for me recently, just different types of fungus in general and how we interact with those, and how they're so much more a part of our environment in our lives than we would ever really realize without researching it. And I love your tip about using compost as a mulch. So, in other words, you're still adding nutrients to the soil, you're just not having to till them in essentially. Is that right?

Leah: Yeah, that's exactly correct. So, I add compost every single year. And I think this is a place where people get a little bit messed up with their gardens is that you have to remember you're growing something there, and you're harvesting it, and you're eating it. And then our waste management system is one that that waste, the human waste is then going out of the system. It's not going back into your garden for a variety of reasons. That would have to be managed very differently, obviously.

And so, you're pulling these nutrients out that aren't being replenished. And so, it's really important that as a gardener that you replenish those nutrients every single year. I know some people do it twice a year. I really just do it once a year. And yeah, it doesn't seem like it would work, but you just put a couple of inches of that compost directly on top of the soil and you can actually seed directly into that. And so, that can either act as your mulch. I mean, I do use compost as a mulch, or I use some of those other things that I mentioned. But adding those nutrients every single year is an important piece of having successful gardening.

The other thing, these cover crops are really important as well. Because you do have nutrients that lie pretty deep within the soil layers, and in order to access them really the best way to do it is by using these different groups. So borage, and comfrey, and daikon radishes, these are all plants that do have deeper root systems that are good at harvesting these minerals, so they can pull those nutrients up. And then the plants themselves are using the sun and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to assimilate plant tissue. So, that's where you're getting your sources of carbon.

If you think about the function of carbon in the soil, carbon is a structure that holds onto things really well. And so, without the addition of carbon, you have nothing to hold on to these vitamins and minerals that are existing within your soil. So, by using these cover crops, for one what you're doing is, you're adding a source of carbon. The other thing that you're doing is you're using cover crops that can harvest those nutrients from deep within the soil layers. And then if you use cover crops that are nitrogen-fixers like clover, they will make

these microbial associations, they'll make these mycorrhiza associations with fungi, and these fungi are capable of fixing the nitrogen that's available in the atmosphere and turning it into a readily available form that can be then used by your plants.

Katie: That makes sense and that's so fascinating. And I would guess also a whole lot less work to be able to use those cover crops versus constantly weeding. You don't have to water as much either, right, if you have this cover crops to hold in the moisture as well?

Leah: Yeah, that's exactly correct. I mean, they serve all of these different benefits. The one thing that I have learned that is a little bit challenging for home gardens when you are using cover crops and you're not tilling, is that it is a better idea to stay away from the grasses. If you're looking for a beginner cover crop to just try out in your garden, I would say try buckwheat. And the reason for that is that it's a really quick grower, and it's about six weeks it'll be ready for harvest. And the way that you harvest it or the way that I'm harvesting it is I wait till it's in full bloom. I don't want it to go to seed. If I let it go to seed then I'm putting weed seeds into my soil. But I do wait till it's in full bloom, and then I'm just going to weed it down and all of that plant matter is just gonna fall onto the surface and this can, A, either be used as a form of mulch because it basically dries into a hay-like substance, or yeah, you can just leave it and then eventually it's just gonna decompose and add more carbon to the soil.

But I leave those roots under the ground. So, they will help to keep the soil in place even when something might not necessarily be growing there. And so, yeah, when you leave the soil alone it has better water storage capacity as well because you have a lot of air pockets that exist throughout your soil and that's where that water is going to be held tightly and is going to be held in a way that's available for plant uptake. I mean, there's differences in the way that water can be stored in the ground. I mean, for example, clay stores water so tightly, it's not necessarily available for plant uptake. But when you use these cover crops and you leave your soils undisturbed, those porous areas where water can be stored, they seem to create themselves and have a better result long-term in the water-storing capacity of your soils.

Katie: Got it. And to circle back on the regenerative side a little bit more, so I feel like there's been conversation about this related to climate change, and certainly, that's a controversial topic right now in general whether we should eat animals, should we not eat animals, do they hurt or help the environment? And I think that could be debated in many podcasts all on its own. But I love your approach to this because you take a more holistic position and talk about it from the practical side that we can we actually, I feel like, all implement in that the change in agriculture could also help address things like environmental health issues and also our own health issues. And I think that's the part that actually puts us in control for our own families. So, let's talk about why scientists are interested in the regenerative agriculture side as a solution not just to climate change, but for some of the other benefits that aren't really at the forefront of the conversation.

Leah: Yeah, that's a great question. So, when you look at climate change, there are a number of sources that have been identified as most problematic and greatest contributors to greenhouse gases. And agriculture is one of the sectors that is the greatest contributor to greenhouse gases. But the interesting thing is that it has



also been identified as one of the best solutions to reversing climate change and actually drawing some of these gases out of the atmosphere, so not just carbon but nitrogen as well.

So when plants are photosynthesizing, when they are taking the energy from the sun and turning it into usable forms of energy and turning it into plant tissues, we think that, you know, you look at this plant and you see, "Okay. Well, this is all carbon, this plant is made of carbon so this is all the carbon that this plant is pulling out of the atmosphere." But the reality is that plants are also pumping photosynthate in the form of carbon molecules into the soil. So, depending on the plant, they can pump anywhere from 40% to 80% of their photosynthate directly into the soil because they are trying to feed that microbial population below the ground.

And so, when you just think of the above-ground biomass as the carbon source from these plants, we are kind of discrediting the incredible potential for plants to pull carbon out of the atmosphere. And so, that's why people are talking about regenerative farming as a way to not just stop and halt climate change, but to actually reverse it by drawing these gases out of the atmosphere and storing them back in the soil where they're supposed to be. So, there is a book written by or edited by Paul Hawken called "Drawdown," and he has identified the top 100 solutions for climate change and 8 of those top 20 are related to agriculture. And so, there's immense potential for the way that we grow food to not just stop climate change, but to also even try to mitigate some of those problems.

But the way that I see this is that we have a tendency to break these issues down into their parts. But if you look at, like you mentioned, I mean, we have all of these different issues, so we have...you know, we're facing a public health crisis right now. We have 6 in 10 adults that have a chronic disease, 4 in 10 adults have 2 or more chronic diseases. 46% of children have a chronic disease. And if you look at the risk factors that influence the development of preventable disease, you find that it boils down to four risk factors. And the number one risk factor is now diet, it has 's now surpassed smoking. Those other two are gonna be excessive alcohol consumption and lack of exercise.

So, these are largely preventable diseases that we're talking about that the majority of people are suffering from, and diet is the key. So, when you're thinking about the way we can grow foods, we can also address these health issues. We can get people healthier foods that will improve their health and not just improve the health of the environment. Some of the benefits that I've seen as a mother to having a garden at my home is that it also encourages healthy eating in my kids. I mean, this is such a prevalent issue in today's society is that we have such a hard time with eating and trying to get our kids interested in eating some of these healthier foods. But I found that when you maintain a vegetable garden, it's kind of this mind-blowing really interesting thing to have kids watch the seed turn into an edible product. And they automatically are more interested in it.

And that's what I saw when I managed the learning garden in Georgia is that we had groups of kids who were arguing over who got to eat the raw brussels sprouts, which this isn't an argument that most people are

having their homes. But it's because those kids were involved in that process and they got to see the process of seed to table and they were actually invested and involved in it.

The other thing that happens, I mean, I don't know how much you know about the nature deficit, I mean, but they estimate that kids on average are only spending about 7 minutes a day outside engaged in unstructured play. And one of the benefits to having a garden is that it forces us outside more often than we would be normally. So, for example, we just had a lot of rain the last few days but I needed to get outside and see what was underneath my row covers so that I could pull some ingredients for the soup that we were having. And I made my kids come out with me. So, then everyone's outside doing something for a little while.

So I think that there are all of these diverse benefits to growing healthy foods, and especially doing that in our own homes to be able to experience this kind of diversity of benefits and not just the health benefits and the benefits for the environment, but what that can do for us socially as well, and what it can do in our communities.

Katie: Yeah, you're so right. I think this is gonna be an increasing area of focus and should be for a lot of us as families, just realizing the far-reaching effects of making these decisions. And when it comes to that, like, certainly, like, we have a garden as well. And I think having a garden is one of the best things we can do, like you mentioned, for health in so many ways, not just because of the food, but because we're outside, and vitamin D, and interacting with the soil microbiome, but also I know it's not possible for everyone to do. So, what are some of the ways that we as consumers can start making positive changes when it comes to even just purchasing better quality foods and products that are better for us and for the environment?

Leah: Yeah. So, the first thing, the first step I think is people learning to cook more. And there is historical significance in the availability of packaged foods in the '40s, and women joining the workforce in the '60s and what that did to the structure of our society and our available time in order to be able to cook more from scratch. But I think that in order to utilize these foods that are going to becoming more and more available to us if we do start growing our own foods or do start going to the farmers' markets more, that we need to know what to do with these foods. So, that's one of the things that I try to address in my cookbook is helping people simplify the process of food in order to make it more achievable.

Because we both know it takes a lot of time to cook from scratch. And so, if you don't have that basic skill, it's hard to even make some of these other choices when it comes to where to buy some of these better quality products. But I think that first and foremost, if you don't have space for growing, you know, don't underestimate the value of a patio garden. So, if you do even have like a balcony and some space where you could throw some lettuce in a pot, it's fun. It's really fun and interesting to throw something in a pot and see what happens. So, that could be one small thing that you do.

Other things if there is a farmer's market available in your area, going to the farmer's market, talking to the farmer's, asking questions. A lot of people feel intimidated to talk to their farmers about their growing

practices. But what I found is that these farmers are really proud of the work that they're doing. And they're actually extremely interested in talking to you about that process and telling you about what it is they do. And so, that's one way that you can figure out the quality of the produce and the meats that you are going to be buying.

And then, I know that that some of these mail order products are also another solution. If these things are not available in your area, I think that locally grown agriculture is the best thing that you can do for your environment, and for the health of your community, and for the health of your family. But I do know that this isn't accessible for everyone. And so, I know that there are things like Misfits, which is this organic...and I'm not affiliated with these organizations in any way, but I know that you can order organic foods online and that they can be shipped to your door. I know that there are different meat services where you can get grass-fed meats. And so, really trying to find those places to access better quality foods.

One thing that I also think is important to think about is, you mentioned us eating meat and what that does for the environment. And yes, this is a huge debate right now. But I do think that one thing that most people can agree upon is that conventionally raised meats are not good for the health of the environment or for human health. And so, if pasture-raised meats, and eggs, and dairy products, and things like that, if those things are not accessible to you, I think that even considering eliminating them from your diet, it is something to think about just because of the environmental and health impact that these foods do have on your body.

Katie: I definitely agree with that. I think that's something that no matter what perspective you're coming at this equation from, I think we can all agree on whether it's the health perspective, the environmental perspective, whatever it may be, is that none of us I don't think want to see animals treated like that, nor do any of us want to consume animal products that are contaminated with all those things and where the animals have been treated so poorly. And I've thought that for years that if we could unite around the things we agree on, whether, you know, those who follow a vegan diet or those who eat meat, if we could unite on the things we agree on, we could actually make so much positive change within that realm by focusing on that together.

And I also love your advice about just growing something small. I know even when I've lived in apartments, you can grow like microgreens and sprouts on your kitchen counter, and those are really low work and you're getting such a fresh food that you can add into your diet. And I think your farmers' market advice is also great. And I know a lot of people listening already do shop at farmers' markets and can probably implement a lot of those tips right off the bat.

And I'd love to circle back more about gardening as well because we are about to be in gardening season depending on where you live. And I think so much of what we've talked about in this episode are things that we can start implementing in home gardens. So, I'd love to get really practical for a little while and talk about from a home gardener's perspective, kind of, how can we 80/20 of this, where's the starting point, if either we are just starting to garden for the first time or we have an existing garden but wanna get more regenerative with how we maintain it?

Leah: Yeah. So, I like that concept of 80/20 too because I think that we have this all or nothing approach and then we oftentimes fail. And I've seen that gardening is no different. When you are learning any new skill, it doesn't matter what it is, you simply can't expect to become an expert right out of the gate. And so, if you are doing this for the very first time, or you've had a garden multiple years and you've had failure after failure after failure, my suggestion would be to downsize and not expand until you feel comfortable managing the amount of space that you have. So if you do just have a patio, you know, starting with a few of these pots, doing some lettuce, greens are generally a pretty easy thing to grow.

Another thing that's pretty easy to grow are green beans. And I found that kids seem to really enjoy these yellow wax beans, are some of my favorite things to grow. These are also a nitrogen-fixer, so they're great for your soil. But I would start with something as small as a 4X8 plot. So, it doesn't necessarily have to be a raised bed unless you have poor drainage. If you have extremely poor drainage, you really have to build that soil up so that your plant roots are staying above the area that stays saturated. I have some raised beds at my house and some of my plants are just planted directly into the ground. Drainage is only an issue for me in certain parts of my yard.

And then the other thing that I would focus on is your soil. Because you're not actually growing plants, you are nurturing healthy soil. And when you can change your outlook and approach to gardening, that's when you're gonna start to have success is when you nurture that soil. Because if you have good soil, that good soil is automatically going to be nurturing your plants. So you can buy bags of organic compost from Lowe's Hardware, all of these different hardware stores.

You can make your own. I mean, this is something that I tend to do more often simply because I do have such a large area and the expense of buying these bags of compost, it's not practical for me. So I have just some pallets, some wooden pallets that I've built up and I've put leaves, and compost, straw, chicken waste, I mean, I put all sorts of things in there and then let those things decompose and that turns into my compost that I can then add to my garden.

The way that I have started my raised beds is by, I put down cardboard first. And you wanna make sure that your cardboard is totally overlapping so that whatever plants that you're trying to kill beneath the surface of that, they're not going to kind of make their way up through those cracks, because then you have roots that are really low in the ground and it could be really hard to get rid of them. But put down this cardboard, and then I'll actually fill it with wood chips and then just like 4 inches of compost on top of that.

Now, the problem with this is that year one, the wood chips are not going to be very productive because you really don't have a lot of soil there. So, I plant cover crop on top of that, I usually start with buckwheat. When the buckwheat is ready, I weed it down, let it fall to the surface, and then I plant another round of cover crops. So, this last raised bed, I started with the buckwheat and then I did a mix of clover, dye cons, and some type of

grass. I can't remember which it was, but I wish I hadn't done the grass. Again, don't do the grasses if you're not tilling because they are a little bit harder to get rid of.

And so, I kind of just let that bed sit and work on it, let it build that system on its own. I'm not really working that hard. I'm really just kind of enabling that system to do what it needs to do to build a healthy soil. And then year two, that bed is then extremely productive. So, by using those wood chips, you can often get wood chips for free from different tree falling services. I mean, this does depend on where you live. Obviously, if you live in the middle of a city, this isn't going to be an accessible thing. But I live in a more rural area and I just see these trucks on the side of the road when they're near my house, and they're falling trees, and chipping the waste, and I'll ask them, "Can you deliver that load of chips to my house?" And oftentimes they'll do it if they don't already have a place to go.

Katie: I have heard that advice recently from a local gardener where we are as well. And that's on my list to find this week, actually, is to do that combination of wood chips and then compost. And this guy actually, he teaches my kids pole vaulting as well. And I've seen his gardens every week when we go for pole vaulting and I'm just amazed at how fast everything grows. He's been doing that for several years, and even he'll do beds like that and then eventually plant fruit trees there as well. And just seeing how these trees even take off when you prepare the soil like that, it's really astounding how much of a difference that makes.

Leah: Yeah, the wood chips act...they're a great source of carbon. And like I said before, you have to have carbon in your soil to store those nutrients. But when the wood chips are breaking down, there's not a lot of nutrition available to your plants. So, what happens is, in the decomposition process you have...it involves carbon and nitrogen. And so, these microbes require nitrogen and other minerals and nutrients in order to grow, survive, and eat this decaying material. And so, they kind of use up those minerals and those other nutrients that are in the soil temporarily. But it's always as turnover, you know, you have your primary decomposers, your secondary decomposers, your tertiary decomposers, you know, it's the successional process of different species that come in to do this decomposition work.

And so, as you have that succession, you have the die-off of certain bacteria and fungi, and things that then become food for this next round of decomposers that come in. And so, after about a year, this wood has mostly decomposed. That's the other reason I bury it. If you keep the wood on the surface, you're using it more like a mulch and it's not going to decompose as easily. But if you bury wood chips underneath a few inches of compost, it's going to stay wet under there and it's gonna keep decomposing. And then in about a year, you've had enough die-off of those decomposers that those things have now become fertile soil that can start to grow the plants that you're trying to produce.

Katie: That's so fascinating. And I love your approach to this and how it is so much less work overtime, because I think that's one reason people don't maybe jump into gardening is that it seems like a lot of work and a lot of upkeep. And I think when you learn these principles like what you're talking about, not only is it so much less work, but you're gonna end up with more nutrient-dense final product, and you're gonna create this whole ecosystem that's fascinating to watch. And like you mentioned, so cool for our kids to get to see and to learn.

And I do think you're right too, and it makes them more likely to eat the food. That's been my experience as well. When the kids help in the garden, they're so much more invested in the process that they're then willing to try the foods and much less willing to waste those foods because they've worked so hard for them.

Leah: Yeah. And another important part that I wanna tell people about is that failure is an expected part of the gardening process. So, I'll hear people say that something got messed up, or, you know, they can't grow tomatoes, or they have a brown thumb. But gardening is like any other thing you do and you're not going to get it 100% right. You're also working against nature which is completely unpredictable and out of your control. I mean, I think that one of the biggest lessons that I get from gardening is this sense of humility. And even though I have all of this knowledge and all of this experience that I have something that fails every single year, and I have a bug infestation, or I have moles that dig underneath, I have a hailstorm, all of these different things, you're kind of at the mercy of the system.

And so, I think when people come into gardening, they automatically think that they're going to have 100% success. And that doesn't happen for anybody. It doesn't happen for the people who are even the most experienced. This is another fun thing about going to the farmers' market and getting to know your farmers is that you can start talking to them about their failures too. Because even though you see this gorgeous bountiful produce that they're selling at the farmers' market, they have had failure that year as well. But this is one of the life lessons that I feel like you get from gardening. I mean, the life lessons are just so bountiful. I mean, like you're saying with the kids and having them out in the garden.

I let my kids have their own 4x4 area this year. And they got to plant whatever they wanted. And my daughter mostly planted flowers, and she planted them way too close together. And, you know, I just have to ignore that. I think that when people are talking about getting their kids involved in these different processes, whether it's cooking or in the garden, we tend to want things done a certain way. And kids will never be able to do it that certain way unless we let them learn the process that comes along with it.

And so, what I have found for me is that sometimes... My kids are younger than yours, my daughter is 4.5 and my son is 7. And so, they're not particularly helpful in the garden at times. I mean, my son is getting to where he's more helpful. But by giving them their own task that's separate from the actual work that I'm trying to get done, it makes things go a lot smoother. So, that's why I let them each have their own 4x4 and basically just told them, "You can do whatever you want." And so then, I'm not irritated by the fact that everything's planted too closely together or they didn't plant the right things. You know, they can experiment on their own and figure those things out.

I do the same thing in the kitchen with involving my kids. I mean, especially my 7-year-old, again, he's much more helpful and he actually can help, but, you know, my 4-year-old, she's not quite as helpful yet. And so, sometimes when I'm chopping and she wants a job, I just give her a cucumber to chop or a red pepper, or a banana. And usually what happens is she sits there and chops it and she eats it while she does it. So, I think that what I have noticed is that getting kids involved in the process is probably the most powerful thing you can do to improve the eating habits of your family.

Katie: I definitely second that. And I think the other important thing that you mentioned is letting kids try things and fail, and like us trying things and failing and letting them see that. Because that's something I definitely feel like I didn't get a ton of examples of in childhood was that failure was okay and that it's actually a very important part of learning. I think you're right, gardening is a great place to learn that very much hands-on, and to develop a tolerance for failure and an ability to learn from failure versus a fear of it. And I think that's another really important lesson we can pass on to our kids and gardening is such a great way to do it.

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Katie: And as we get near the end of our time, there's a couple of questions I love to ask. The first being if there's any advice that you would really wanna give to anyone who maybe is just starting out or wants to start out but is still a little bit hesitant?

Leah: Yeah. So, I would say start small and know that when you're referencing these experts who appear to have it all together, that it took them years to get to the point where they're at. So if you're interested in having a garden, but you're not quite sure yet what to do with kale or how to wash lettuce, I mean, these are really great starting points. I think learning what to do with vegetables can be one of the most powerful things that you can do for your health. And doing this in a small step-wise progression is going to be the most successful way to approach it.

So, I have developed this system of meal planning and prep that I write about in my cookbook, but it took me years to develop this. And I did it under the stress of having two kids with medical disadvantages. I mean, especially for my daughter having genetic disease, there is no curing her disease. There is no eating our way out of this. But I wanted to support her in the best way that I possibly could. So, it's really coming at this from a pretty...I would say in those early years of her diagnosis, I mean, a pretty desperate position, feeling like I was out of control of her health and I wanted to control whatever aspects of her health I possibly could.

And so, it took me years to get it right. And now it feels like second nature being able to cook from scratch. But it didn't happen like that in the beginning, and my garden is the exact same way. It started much smaller than it is now. And, I mean, I wish I could show you the photos of the garden I started like 15 years ago. I mean, it was like this super dinky, ugly, unproductive thing. And it was basically a failure. And now I have a lot of success. And it wasn't because I did anything magical, but it was that I just kept trying. And over the years, I got better at it.

Katie: I love that. And I'll make sure I link to your book. And I know you talk about a lot of this in your book, and also to your website in the show notes. So, if you guys are listening while you're doing something else, it's [wellnessmama.fm](http://wellnessmama.fm), all the links will be there. But speaking of books, are there any books that have had, besides your own, of course, really dramatic impact on your life and that you would recommend?

Leah: Yeah. So, I am an avid reader and it's hard for me to choose just a couple. I really love books. And so, it's exciting for me that I actually get to become an author. It wasn't quite what I was ever expecting to do but it was an opportunity that sort of fell into my lap and I ran with it because I do love to read. But the two, if I had to just choose two, one would be "Gut and Psychology Syndrome" by Natasha Campbell-McBride. And this was a book that I read early on in my daughter's diagnosis that I wanted to understand more about this gut immunity connection. And this book does a fabulous job of breaking that down. And this book helped me understand more about the value of food in the way that it impacts your microbes, and how those microbes affect your immunity.

And so, with two kids with these different medical problems, and me with my son with asthma and allergies, this is an overactive immune response. And by restricting our diet and really focusing on the quality of our foods, his condition has drastically improved. I mean, it's so hard for me to tell whether or not that's a result of what we've done as far as work for lifestyle changes and diet, or if it's just him growing out of these things. I mean, these are things that I'm never gonna know. But I feel pretty confident that the dietary choices that we've made have really helped support him. So this is a great book for anybody who's interested, "Gut and Psychology Syndrome." This is a good book for anyone interested in learning more about food, and microbes, and your digestion.

And then another one is actually one that I read recently that's a memoir by Pam Houston, "Deep Creek". And I sometimes get bogged down by all of the issues that I hear about with environmental problems and agriculture. And her memoir was such a beautiful contribution to the environment that she loves so much.



And so, I think for anyone who is an environmentalist and who does feel this real sense of passion for the natural world around you, it's just such a relatable book. And so, I really enjoyed that one as of recent.

Katie: I love both of those. And I'll make sure they're linked in the show notes. And for anyone who wants to continue learning from you, where can they find you online?

Leah: So, I am at [deeproootedwellness.com](http://deeproootedwellness.com). I'm in the process of kind of switching my website over. But for now, that should keep working for years to come as well, that can at least redirect you to whatever my new website is gonna be. And then, I'm on Facebook as Leah M Webb, or on Instagram as Leah\_m\_webb. And I am doing a lot of public speaking these days, I'm traveling to promote my book, and then also just to do more work talking to families about the topics that we've talked about today. And so, if they get on my website, they can find my events page. And I have events all over the country coming up this year, and I imagine it will be the same. And so, hopefully, they can come and see me speak somewhere.

Katie: Awesome, Leah. Thank you so much for being here and for all that you do to educate about this topic. I think it's an increasingly important one. And I'm so grateful that there are people like you out there making it practical.

Leah: Yeah, and same to you. I mean, your website is such a wealth of information, especially for recipes and DIY stuff and just all of this general information. There's a group of us moms, actually, that meets a few times a year and we do a lot of the recipes that are on your website. So we've used your beeswax stuff and some of your soaps, and yeah, so it's a great resource as well. So, I appreciate the work you do too.

Katie: Oh, thank you. And thanks to all of you for listening and sharing your time with us today. We're so grateful that you did. And I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of the "Wellness Mama Podcast."

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