

Raising a Stink Over Chinese Produce (The Dangers of "Night Soil")

A Published Letter to the *Los Angeles Times*

August 12, 2001

Two points particularly struck me in "Farmers' Fears Take Root" (Aug. 8), citing the fears of fruit and vegetable growers here in California and throughout the U.S. facing competition from their counterparts in China.

First, your article noted that costs for land, labor, energy, water, and fertilizer are much less in China than in the U.S. Second, you reported that "U.S. produce ... is grown under stricter health and safety standards than those found in most of China."

Now, it has been quite some time since I graduated from the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences at U.C., Davis; but am I to conclude from these reports that Chinese farmers are continuing their traditional practice of fertilizing their fields with "night earth" [a.k.a. "night soil"]—collected free from ubiquitous roadside outhouses?

If I am wrong, I hope someone will correct me. But if I am right, I hope someone will please assure us that our food supply is, and will continue to be, safe and wholesome. Although I am an organic gardener (with a sincere respect for the industrious Chinese people and their rich, ancient culture), I think I would rather take

my chances with home-grown crops, even if they were genetically engineered (assuming they were independently tested).

Note: An ecologist colleague confirmed to me that the traditional practice of fertilizing fields with night soil continues throughout much of the world—artificial nitrogen fertilizers are typically too expensive (their synthesis requiring the input of much energy).