Today, there are any number of ways to use cannabis. Gummy worms, blunts, vape pens, infused-flour fried chicken and ginger snap cookies are but just a few mediums through which consumers can enjoy THC or CBD. But while imbibers regularly weigh these options internally, less often do they consider the farms from which the plants are grown and harvested. And even rarer is an examination of the very soil in which those plants are rooted. What would happen if we held what feeds our cannabis plants to the same standard as how they look, smell or taste?

American Cannabis Company, a cannabis consulting firm, is one of the many organizations looking at new ways farmers can grow and produce healthier and richer cannabis plants. One prominent route they’ve taken is to examine the soil in which the plants are grown to develop new ways to enrich said plants. For Ellis Smith, Co-founder of the American Cannabis Company, soil is almost always on his mind. “We’re just trying to mimic what Mother Nature has been doing forever,” Smith notes before adding, “I don’t tell people I grow cannabis, I tell people I grow soil.”
And he’s right. The focus should be on soil. Because without healthy soil, there are no healthy plants. And soil, for those unaware, isn’t just the moistened dirt at our feet. Under a microscope, it can be an entire flourishing ecosystem—and a feast for a growing plant. Smith—as do many others—calls this idea living soil. “We have been stuck with traditional basement mindsets,” he says. “As we are evolving and coming out of the basement, everyone is tinkering. Instead of tinkering on Corvettes in our garage, we’re tinkering with our plants and our soil in our grow rooms.”

If you’re a cannabis business, you have at least a few goals: to make money, to reduce cost and to create the best product possible. And if you’re a very successful cannabis company, you have to do this on a large scale that may indeed continue to grow. In the past, cannabis growers used various water-based systems—most famously, hydroponics—that delivered, or force-fed, what the plants needed straight to the plant. But this idea is antithetical to the history of agriculture, Smith argues. “We’re not giving plants nutrient-rich water,” he explains. “We’re not force-feeding them heavy amounts of nutrients. Instead, we make everything available in the soil. And when the plant wants to eat it, it can.”

In other words, instead of treating their plants like foie gras ducks, they’re allowing them to be more free-range and autonomous while simultaneously setting their plants up with all they need to succeed. Ellis and the American Cannabis Company are introducing their specially-developed living soil, SoHum (named after South Humboldt County), an all-natural, fully-organic, pH-balanced, biodiverse product. To use a metaphor, if a plant is the farmer’s kid, then this type of soil is a top-notch private school. “We feed the soil and we let the plant feed itself,” says Michael Olsen, Director of Business Management at the American Cannabis Company.

For the American Cannabis Company, this type of “super soil” was necessary. In the race to create the best product for the cheapest cost, and to distinguish themselves among the many others competing, cannabis grow companies are looking for new and better ways to cultivate crops. In an age when some choose to till their farms, employ water-based grow methods or even utilize dirt that is not alive, SoHum may give other growers an edge. “Everyone says their methodology is the best,” offers Smith. “We don’t want to say that. But when you look at the plants that come from our soil, they are of the richest quality. For us, it gives us the experience we’re looking for.”
SoHum, Smith says, allows growers to remain mostly hands-off after the initial planting. “Some farmers get two rounds off my soil,” he boasts. And while using the natural, nutrient- and organic matter-plentiful soil is not a new idea—it is, in fact, how most of nature has grown and proliferated over the last million years, give or take—harnessing its power and being as precise and intelligent about its delicate balance as possible is a burgeoning focus. The living soil method has proven safer, requires less labor and water and is more sustainable. “Ellis cracked the code on living soils,” his colleague Olsen maintains. “The product was so effective that we wanted to bring it to commercial and retail markets as soon as possible.”

And SoHum isn’t the only way to get the living soil so many are clamoring for. A living soil is one of the most effective ways to achieve the tried-and-true combination of bacteria, fungus, macro- and micro-nutrients that plants need to grow and reach their full potential. And if your marijuana plant is at its full potential, then your gummy worms, blunts, vape pens, infused-flour fried chicken and ginger snap cookies will be that much safer, cleaner and healthier. So next time you’re shopping around, think about asking how the flower in the product you’re eyeing was grown. The answer may surprise you.

“EVERYONE SAYS THEIR METHODOLOGY IS THE BEST . . . WE DON’T WANT TO SAY THAT. BUT WHEN YOU LOOK AT THE PLANTS THAT COME FROM OUR SOIL, THEY ARE OF THE RICHEST QUALITY. FOR US, IT GIVES US THE EXPERIENCE WE’RE LOOKING FOR.”

—ELLIS SMITH, CO-FOUNDER OF THE AMERICAN CANNABIS COMPANY