

NATURAL GARDENING FOR HEALTHIER PEOPLE AND PLANET

I've gone "green" as a gardener, using only natural products in my vegetable garden, flowerbeds and on my lawn. Growing my own organic seasonal fruits and vegetables is a fun, economical way to eat healthfully. Plus, as any gardener will tell you, all of that digging and hoeing is great exercise and a wonderful way to spend time outdoors on these beautiful warm days.

"Natural gardening is a growing area of interest among people who want to avoid the toxins in many mainstream gardening products -- plus, it really works," said Howard Garrett, a registered landscape architect, organic horticulturalist and author of *The Organic Manual: Natural Organic Gardening and Living For Your Family, Plants and Pets*. How is "natural organic" gardening, as Garrett refers to it, different? "Natural organic gardening is working with only natural materials to promote healthy gardens, without the use of toxic chemicals or artificial fertilizers," said Garrett. "It is not just a matter of using a different set of products, it's a whole different thought process and procedure."

SYNTHETIC GARDENING PRODUCTS ARE HARMFUL

There is plenty of proof that synthetic gardening products, including pesticides (herbicides, insecticides, fungicides) and fertilizers aren't good for us, nor our earth, whether they're used by commercial farmers or individuals.

First, let's look at synthetic pesticides: An abundance of scientific evidence demonstrates their harmful effects. In 2004, a study was published by scientists at the National Cancer Institute and the National Institute for Environmental Health Science who conducted a review of more than 300 studies and found a link between pesticides and cancers such as non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, leukemia and prostate cancer. In addition, researchers found that chronic low-level pesticide exposure is associated with a broad range of nervous system symptoms such as headache, fatigue, dizziness, tension, anger, depression and impaired cognitive function. They also found that pesticide exposure may increase Parkinson's disease and could be associated with Alzheimer's disease.

It turns out that pesticides don't do much good for plants, either. "Synthetic pesticides do not even work," said Garrett. "They kill beneficial insects and microorganisms more effectively than the insects and microorganisms that you're trying to kill. There are natural organic alternatives that work much better."

Now let's look at fertilizers. While synthetic fertilizers have not been linked to specific human diseases, many contain nitrates that can leach into the ground, affecting our environment and our drinking water. Perhaps not surprisingly, synthetic fertilizers also don't work well on plants. In fact, said Garrett, these products often "fool" people by creating impressive growth initially, followed by a "pooping out" period that encourages people to apply more product, which perpetuates the cycle. "Most people are surprised to learn that synthetic fertilizers are basically salts," Garrett explains. "When you put salts on plants over and over again, it throws the plant's biology out of balance, which eventually kills it. The salts also cause the soil to harden and get so compact that it won't drain water well."

LET MOTHER NATURE BE YOUR GARDNER

Natural gardening is immensely better for our health and our environment, and it turns out that it's great for plants, too. Natural gardening creates stronger plants that can withstand stressors such as extreme changes in temperature, insects and disease. "The most significant benefit you will notice is your plants have greater tolerance for dramatic weather," said Garrett. "For instance, plants aren't as vulnerable to frost, and therefore can enjoy a longer growing season. These plants are also more resistant to insects and disease."

A common misconception is that natural gardening is more costly -- but Garrett says it actually saves money in the long run. For one thing, you never have to rebuild the garden beds -- they just continue to get better and better. You'll also need to fertilize less often, because the natural products are slow-releasing and longer-lasting.

GOING GREEN IN YOUR GARDEN

Stop using all synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals that harm living organisms. Don't try to combine natural and conventional approaches, as it won't work, says Garrett.

Fertilize with only natural products such as compost or natural fertilizer products two or three time a year. Feed the soil in which your plants grow with liquid fertilizer or compost "tea" (see recipe below) during the **growing season**.

Create a compost pile, nature's own living fertilizer. It can be started any time of the year in sun or shade. Anything that was once alive can go in the compost, including grass clippings, leaves, vegetable and fruit food scraps, bark, sawdust, rice hulls, weeds, nut hulls and animal manure. Mix the ingredients together and simply pile the material on the ground. The best mixture is 80% vegetative matter and 20% animal waste, although any mix **will compost**.

Build soil health with natural organic products and techniques. Apply compost, rock materials such as lava sand, granite and basalt and dry molasses (which you can find at gardening centers that cater to organic gardeners) to all **planting areas**.

Mulch bare soil around all shrubs, trees, ground covers and food crops. This protects the soil from sunlight, wind and rain, inhibits weeds, decreases watering needs and mediates soil temperature. Native cedar is the **best choice**.

Water only as needed. Natural gardening reduces the frequency and volume of water needed. Water when plants **begin to wilt**.

Mow lawns only as necessary and leave clippings on the lawn. This returns nutrients and organic matter to the soil. Put occasional excess clippings **in compost pile**.

For weed control, hand-pull large weeds and cultivate soil health. Mulch all bare soil to keep weeds to a minimum. Avoid all synthetic herbicides. Spray weeds as needed with vinegar-**based herbicides**.

Control pests the natural way. Use natural products to encourage beneficial insects and spray plants with compost tea mixtures such as Garrett Juice, which is a mixture of natural ingredients including compost, water, apple cider, vinegar, molasses and seaweed (see below).

If you aren't experienced and want to get started, Garrett says that vegetables and herbs such as garlic, chives, radishes, beans, peas and okra are easiest for beginners. "Also small tomatoes, most greens, including spinach during the cooler weather, and beets and sweet potatoes, which are almost foolproof especially for those *with* sandy soil." Note: If your plants are already growing strong, it's likely too late to go all the way green this season... but you certainly can start planning for a naturally healthy, environmentally friendly **garden going forward**.

Recipe for Compost Tea and Garrett Juice:

Make Compost Tea by soaking compost in water. Fill any container half full of compost and finish filling with water. Let the mix sit 24 hours, then dilute and spray on the foliage of any and all plants. Be sure to strain the solids out with old pantyhose **or cheesecloth**. For Garrett Juice, mix one gallon of water with 1 cup of manure-based compost tea. Add 1 ounce apple cider vinegar, 1 ounce molasses and 1 ounce liquid seaweed.

For homemade fire ant killer, add 2 ounces of citrus oil to the gallon of Garrett Juice.

For more information, visit [Garrett's Web site](http://www.DirtDoctor.com) at www.DirtDoctor.com. You can also e-mail questions to Garrett at info@dirtdoctor.com.

Source(s):

Howard Garrett is a registered landscape architect, organic horticulturalist, broadcaster and writer with extensive experience in landscape contracting, greenhouse growing, golf course planning and maintenance and organic product development. Garrett is author of several *books, including The Organic Manual: Natural Organic Gardening and Living For Your Family*, Plants and Pets, a non-regional guide to organic gardening (Tapestry). For [more information go](http://www.DirtDoctor.com) to www.DirtDoctor.com.