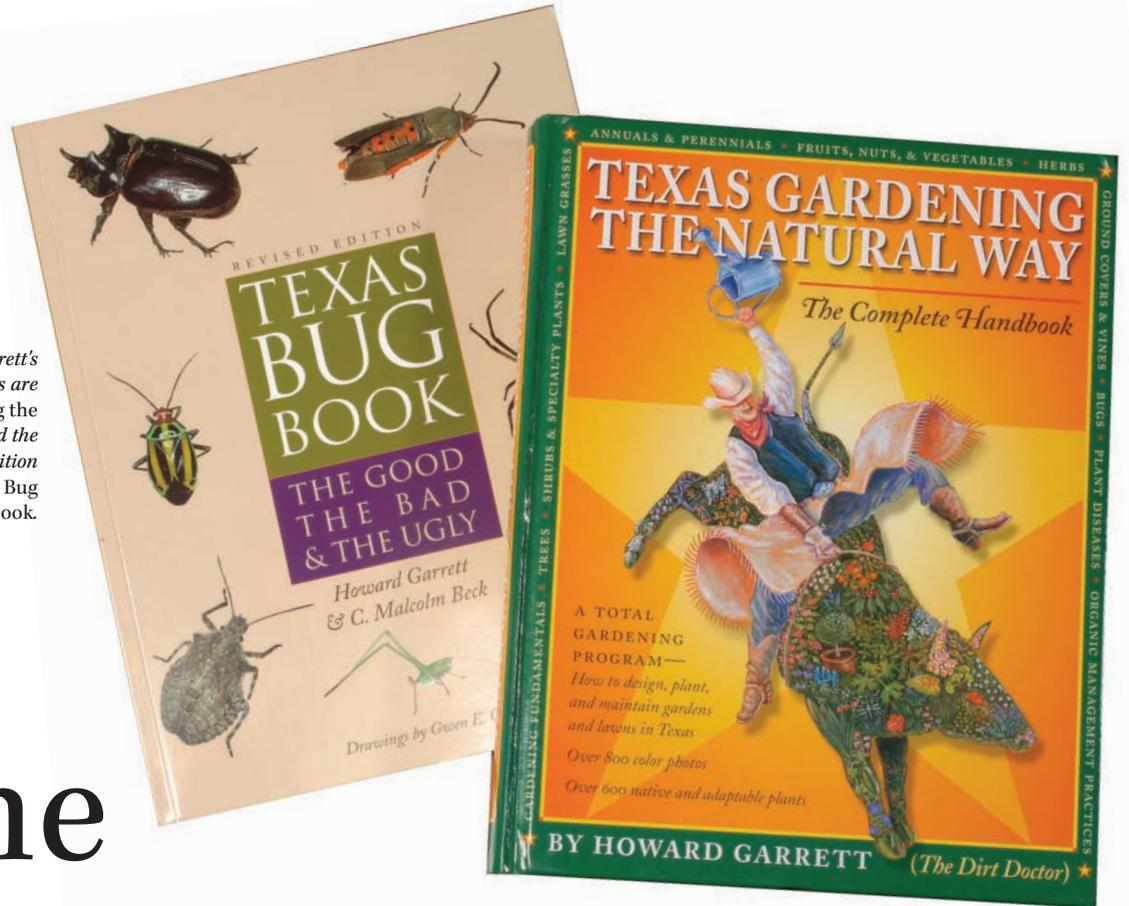


author, author

by Britney Porter

Howard Garrett's latest books are *Texas Gardening the Natural Way* and the newly revised edition of *The Texas Bug Book*.



The Dirt Doctor is in

If your yard could talk, what would it say? *Feed me!* or *I'm thirsty!*? Perhaps, *Enough with the chemicals!* Howard Garrett, also known as “The Dirt Doctor,” prescribes organic gardening solutions in *Texas Gardening the Natural Way: The Complete Handbook*. From flowers, plants, trees, ground covers, and vines to fruits, nuts, vegetables, and herbs – various species are classified by their habit and culture as well as their uses and problems. The book’s more than 800 photos appeal to plant patrons, too, or those who may be “green” on gardening.

Garrett, a Pittsburg, Texas, native, said that his grandparents were in the agricultural business, “but it was just work back then.” Today, gardening and landscaping are careers, hobbies, and, well, art forms. Organic gardening is especially popular in Texas. According to Garrett, Texas owns the “bragging rights” of having more stores that carry organic products than any other state in the country, products like Garrett Juice.™

Garrett’s most notable organic,

architectural project in Plano is Frito-Lay’s national headquarters. “We converted it into a total organic program in 1989,” he said. “There are others now, but that is still the largest one.”

Garrett moved to Dallas in 1970. He received a bachelor of science degree in park administration and landscape architecture from Texas Tech University. Then, he worked as a laborer and assistant golf course superintendent at Club Corporation of America (Farmers

Branch, Texas) aiming to become a golf course architect. His interest in landscape design, however, sprouted into a more natural fit.

Garrett began experimenting with organic programs in 1985 when his daughter Logan was born, and she had begun picking up and tasting everything within reach. “Why it doesn’t hit every parent, I don’t understand, but it hit me hard,” Garrett said. “I wanted no more toxic chemicals around my little girl!”

Howard Garrett offers organic gardening and landscaping solutions in *Texas Gardening the Natural Way*

Garrett has become a highly recognized spokesperson for organic programs. He's authored 11 books, published a magazine called *DIRT*, has his own radio show, and answers a Q-and-A weekly column in *The Dallas Morning News*.

The ISA-certified (International Society of Arboriculture) arborist calls organic gardening the "Natural Way" and admits, "My planting techniques are considerably different than what most people recommend." For example, "People that push chemicals tell everybody to wait and fertilize in April, but I don't agree with that at all. I think you should fertilize much earlier in February, or March at the latest, for root growth."

Garrett's organic fertilization program includes three fertilization periods: First fertilization occurs as early as January and into March; second fertilization occurs sometime in June; and third fertilization occurs between September and October.

Garrett Juice™ is a popular fertilizer made of water, compost tea, seaweed, apple cider vinegar, and molasses. "Molasses is a carbohydrate that stimulates biological activity; seaweed and vinegar help plants produce fruit in the seed; and compost tea is a natural liquid fertilizer," Garrett said. "Garrett Juice™ is wonderful and it's the only root stimulator I recommend."

Of course to Garrett, using toxic fertilizers and chemical pesticides is a gardener's biggest mistake. "The second biggest mistake gardeners make is planting trees too deep into the ground, not so much for the foundation of a home but for the health of the trees," he added. "People waste a lot of money and don't get results out of their plants if the plants are dug too deep into the ground."

Garrett recommends that gardeners dig tree holes 2 inches shallower than the height of a tree's ball of roots. "If it is properly exposed you can step on it,"

he said. "If people would do that one simple thing, it would be remarkable how much better trees would grow, and they [gardeners] wouldn't have to use chemicals."

Trees are the most important landscape element, according to Garrett. They are the "framework" of a yard and "trees are the only landscape element that will improve the value of your property tremendously. Nothing else will," he said. "Grass, shrubs, ground cover – they're pretty and they may help a property sale, but they don't increase property value; and trees only do it if they're healthy and growing properly."

In *Texas Gardening the Natural Way*, Garrett tells it how it is, leaving nothing to wither. He describes eastern red cedar trees as having "very small unimpressive flowers in spring." And when he discusses compost, he says, "I used to go along with the crowd and say not to use greasy cooked food from the kitchen, but then ... Earth to Howard: if it can't go into the compost pile, then you shouldn't have been eating it!"

Speaking of compost, this is the best fertilizer and key to any organic program, according to Garrett. Compost should be 80 percent vegetative matter and 20 percent animal waste. He added, "Recycling organic material that grows up on your property is efficient. Some people can't because of space or physical limitations, but people who have clippings and leaves and the room to make compost, that's the best way to go. That's how it works in nature ... out on the prairie."

The Dirt Doctor emphasized that organic gardening and landscaping is based on healthy soil. "Organic gardening is dealing with the soil more so than the plants; healthier soil means bigger healthier roots on plants. If the soil is unhealthy you're never going to have a really successful situation."

Stray animals and menacing pests may create an unsuccessful situation, but in *Texas Gardening the Natural Way*, Garrett proposes ways to keep intruders out. Orange peelings, for example, have been reported to repel cats. Garrett prefers using mulch. "Sometimes mulching with lava gravel helps," he said. "Lava gravel mulch prevents squirrels from digging in your plants."

The Dirt Doctor has learned a lot during his residency – in his own backyard. "I do more experimentation than design that looks good all the time, which my wife is not too thrilled about," he laughed. "I really concentrate on trees. I've got a lot of different species. We have shady conditions, so we've got some ginkgo at my house. (See a picture of Garrett's ginkgo tree on page 54.) I'm fully convinced that it's done so well because it's in healthy soil and in the organic program. Ginkgo is an ancient tree and it probably needs that organic approach more than any other plant."

"The organic program just works better in every way," Garrett continued. "We have fewer insect and disease problems, and we have fewer heat-stress problems because the moisture stays in the soil for longer periods of time."

So what is the remedy for a sick yard? Follow the doctor's orders and offer plenty of organic fluids. "We keep learning new stuff literally on a weekly basis and we find better products on the market," said Garrett. "I'm always eager to learn more. What we recommend works, but there are probably things we haven't even figured out yet!"

The Dirt Doctor can be heard on WBAP, 820 AM Saturdays from 11 a.m. - noon and on Sundays from 8 a.m. - noon. For more information on Howard Garrett and organic gardening, visit www.DirtDoctor.com.