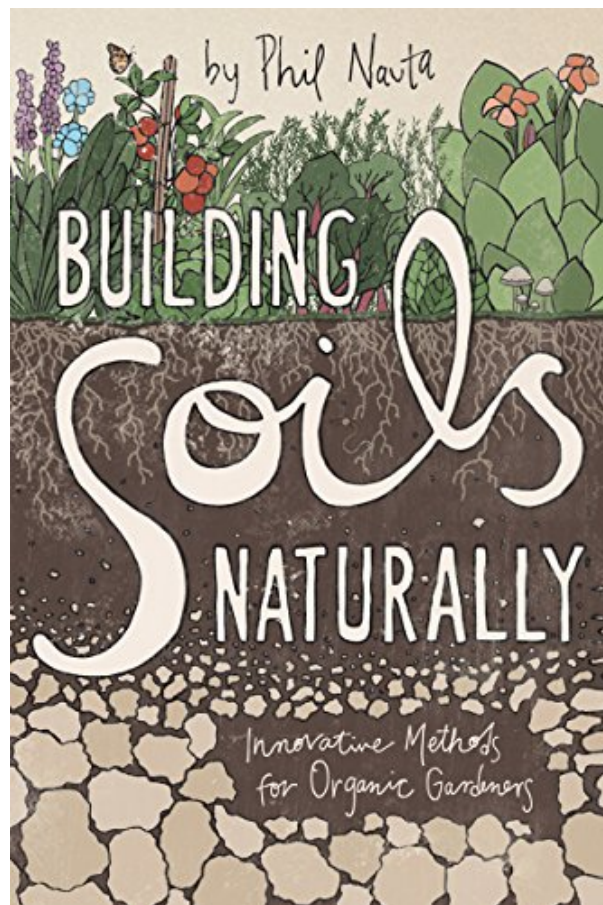
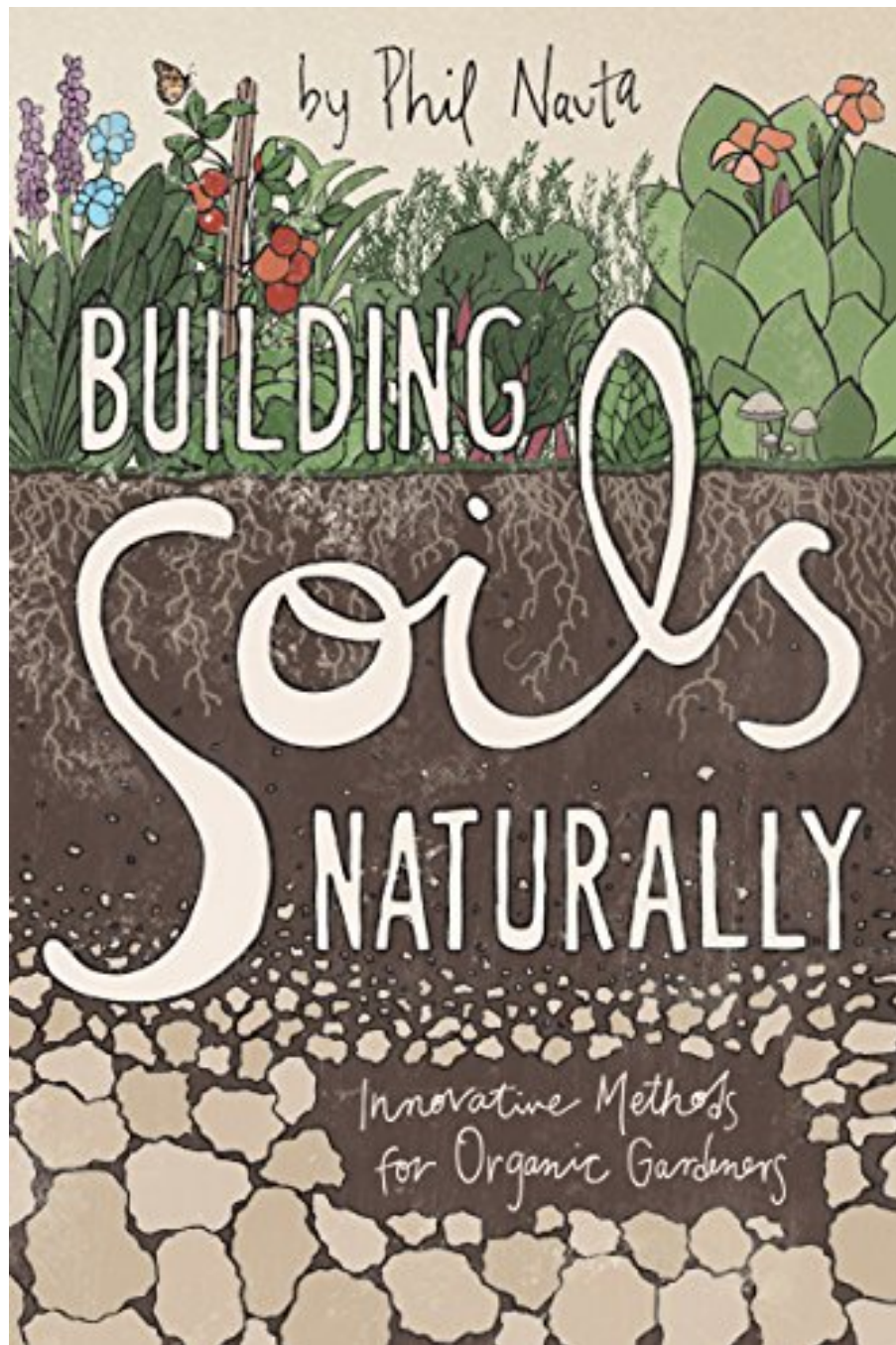


**BUILDING SOILS NATURALLY:
INNOVATIVE METHODS FOR ORGANIC
GARDENERS BY PHIL NAUTA**



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Review

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In an organic garden, plants in optimum health thrive abundantly, have harvests with amazing taste, and have the ability to fight off plant predators. When they don't there's often something lacking in their proper nutrition, they are missing beneficial microorganism companions, or they are short of the energy needed to reach their full nutrient-dense potential. The solution is to "start with the soil." But healthy soil doesn't happen just by composting, fertilizing or companion planting alone. The solution is in Building Soils Naturally, where gardeners will find a hands-on plan of how to create productive, living soil by using a practical holistic approach — crafted right in your garden.

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Most helpful customer reviews

70 of 73 people found the following review helpful.

Sigh. Paramagnetism?

By Bazbar

The majority of the useful information in this book could be distilled into far fewer pages than are presented to the reader.

Sections like this one on paramagnetism are annoying on multiple levels:

"Soil is paramagnetic [...] highly paramagnetic soils are more energetically aligned with the earth and even the universe, and actually invite energy into them [...] Increased paramagnetism brings increased water retention, [...] Plants are diamagnetic [...] I imagine it's a good thing, too, because it gives the soil and plants a kind of yin-yang relationship." Oh, ok.

Now this is broken up to save you some time and it's only a small section of the book - but the... mindset in the above snippets permeates this book. None of the specific claims are backed up with specific footnotes and sources (though a general bibliography is provided).

The most useful information revolves around soil testing and the actions to take when the results of the test are received. You can find that same information online for free. So too with soil inoculants, compost tea, etc.

If you're interested in understanding Mr. Nauta's world view then I recommend this book. If you're interested in building soils naturally you're better off with free online sources.

37 of 38 people found the following review helpful.

Better Soil = Better Plants = Better Health

By Laurie J. Neverman

Building Soils Naturally: Innovative Methods for Organic Gardeners by Phil Nauta (AKA The Smiling Gardener) is all about helping you to grow the best quality food possible, starting from the ground up. It all starts with healthy soil. With living, balanced soil, plants are healthier, more pest and disease resistant, there are less weed problems, and your garden better accommodates moisture fluctuations.

Begin with Soil Testing

Phil advocates starting out with a good quality soil test to establish a baseline for your soil and identify any glaring problems up front. If your budget allows, annual tests or tests every few years are great, but not essential, although they will allow you to tailor your soil amending for best results. If your budget is really tight, Phil also offers tips for visual identification of soil problems, such as looking at color and texture and plant growth. Certain weeds will also proliferate in soils that are deficient in certain minerals. Balance the soil, and the weeds disappear.

Create Healthy Soil in Six Steps

Building Soils Naturally breaks down the hows and whys of soil building into six steps/components that are needed for optimal soil health. They are:

Water

Organic Matter

Microbial Inoculants
Supplemental Nutrients
Biostimulants & Micronutrients
Energy

Water: You'll find out why drip irrigation can stress plants. See how rainwater produces the best results in your garden, and how mulch and cover crops influence water in the soil.

Organic Matter: Find out why mulch and cover crops build soil, making it more tolerant of drought and excess rains, which are best to use and which should be avoided. Get tips for indoor and outdoor composting.

Microbial Inoculants: Give your soil a "jump start" with specific microbial inoculants that help build a healthy soil web in a hurry. Some plants need soil that is heavy on bacteria, others prefer soil that is more balanced towards fungi. Both are necessary. Learn about compost tea brewing, Effective Microorganisms and culturing your own microorganisms.

Supplemental Nutrients: You'll learn which supplements are worth buying and which should be avoided (there's a lot of GMO contamination in products that used to be recommended to organic gardeners). Too many nutrients, or too much of a particular nutrient, can cause just as many or more problems as too few nutrients.

Biostimulants & Micronutrients: You'll be provided with in depth, detailed information about the microbial life and chemical balance that is essential for healthy soil, and ways to create this life and balance in your garden. Your soil can be loaded with nutrients, but if it's low in microbial life, or out of balance, the plants may not be able to absorb and use the nutrients. Biostimulants such as sea minerals, molasses and humates boost friendly microorganism populations. Micronutrients can sometimes be the key that's needed to unlock maximum nutrient potential in our food.

Energy: Like all living things, plants have their own energy patterns, which are influenced by their environment, and in turn affect how they are used by our bodies. I know this may sound "out there" to many, but to me, it's logical. Most of us know that listening to music can relax you (or excite you), and that certain noises are extremely irritating (nails on chalkboard, jackhammers, etc). Evidence suggests that stray voltage can cause significant health problems for animals and for people, why not plants? I think I'm going to be doing some experimenting in the coming years with some plant music out in the garden.

Any downsides to this book?

There is a *LOT* of information in this book. The beginning gardener or someone with very little technical background might feel overwhelmed at times. For those on a very tight budget, some of the tests, supplements and soil amendments recommended may be too expensive. That said, reading this book gave me a ton of ideas for improvising "homebrew/homegrown" options (which Phil hopes to expand on as well in future publications).

I think *Building Soils Naturally* has the potential to fundamentally change the way you look at your garden. You can use weeds and pests as diagnostic tools (and watch how they disappear over time with proper management). If you want to get fancy, you can get a refractometer and measure the Brix readings of your produce, which should also improve over time. (You could also measure store produce, and see how it comes up lacking.)

I know that in the past two weeks as I've been reading the book, I've made changes and started brainstorming about things I want to do this season and into the future. I like books that get me thinking, and I firmly believe that improving the health of our soils will improve the health of our plants, and in turn improve our health.

22 of 24 people found the following review helpful.

New Ideas for Your Garden

By Bill Brikiatis

This review was reprinted from the Suburban Hobby Farmer blog.

I FIRST STARTED READING PHIL NAUTA and his Smiling Gardener Blog in the fall of 2010. Right away, his blog struck me as different from the other how-to-garden-better blogs. It was obvious that Phil had a wealth of knowledge. Plus, his info was often quite a bit more "technical" than the others.

To give you a sense of what I mean, Phil regularly wrote about subjects like mycorrhizal fungi, biological transmutation and the brix test. You've got to admit that these topics are not what you'd normally find on blogs like A Way to Garden or Urban Organic Gardener.

One Smiling Gardener article that really got my attention was on how gardeners could potentially catch mad cow disease from bone meal. Phil made a strong enough case against bone meal that I decided to stop using it on my flowers.

So when Phil offered a free review copy of his newly minted book called Building Soils Naturally*, I knew right away that it would be packed with interesting info. It didn't take much convincing to get me to review it.

BUILDING SOIL FROM A TO Z

Phil's book starts with the basics of improving your soil, some of which he also wrote about in his Suburban Hobby Farmer guest article. Then it progresses to the deeply technical aspects of determining and curing specific soil nutrient deficiencies.

Much of the information could only come from someone who has studied plant nutrition in some detail. No question Phil has studied. He started a natural fertilizer company and has taught organic horticulture at Gaia College, a school that teaches holistic land management and environmentally sustainable technologies.

There's also no question that he's against standard NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium) fertilizer. He challenges the proponents of NPK whenever he has the opportunity and encourages readers to go beyond even organic soil improvement methods with soil tests and what I'll call exotic additives.

Unquestionably, parts of Building Soils Naturally will be more sophisticated than what many backyard gardeners will be willing to put into practice. Be warned, Phil frequently suggests seeking out and paying for soil additives. Regular readers of this site know that this goes against the spirit of Suburban Hobby Farmer, where I try to pay as little as possible for my soil improvement.

PAYING WILL BE WORTH IT

Phil promises that paying will be worth it. He believes that once you reach the perfect soil for a specific plant, it will be invisible to insect predators and diseases. Produce will be tastier and much more nutritious.

Plus, the shelf life will be greatly extended. In short, a fruit or vegetable grown in ideal soil conditions will be no less than a super food.

Phil is skilled at persuasion. He makes a great case for his methodology. Still, some claims seem too good to be true. Take Phil's point that plants grown in ideal soil will be invisible to predators. This has not always been the case in my garden. My blueberries have nearly ideal conditions, including soil that is perfect for them. Yet, Japanese beetles are able to locate them and prefer them over other crops that have been weakened by less than ideal soil. My philosophy is nothing works 100 percent of the time.

Still, this book has more new ideas than anything I've read in a long time. There are many suggestions that I want to test in my garden. Here are five examples:

1. Water your soil microbes, not just your plants. Many gardeners, myself included, have been guilty of watering only in the root zone of my vegetable plants. I thought this was a good way to save water. The problem with pinpoint watering is that the soil life outside of the wet zone is deprived of water. Microorganisms, earthworms and insects need water as much as the plants, and the health of your plants depends on the health of these organisms.
2. Add seaweed to your compost. I've been thinking that seaweed would be a nutrient-rich, free source of material for the compost. This book gave me the kick in the pants to go get some. According to Phil, there's no need to rinse the salt out before adding it to the pile.
3. Try diluted sea water as plant food. This is one of the most controversial ideas in the book. The premise is that sea water has minerals and active organic substances that will benefit your plants. Phil points to research by Maynard Murray that concluded that minerals from sea water increased yields and improved the overall health of plants. As you might expect, others believe that essentially "salting" your soil is a bad idea. I'm going to test a 10 percent solution of sea water on a small part of my garden. I'll let you know if it works for me.
4. Add hairy vetch as part of your cover crop. Phil makes the case that cover crop should be a mixture of legumes and grasses. Legumes add nitrogen to the soil and grasses provide high volumes of organic matter. He likes hairy vetch* as a legume because it captures the most nitrogen. He likes cereal rye as a grass because of the volume of organic matter it provides. I'm going to try a combination of the two this fall.
5. Inoculate your compost with new microbes. One way to get some diversity of microbes in your compost is to take a few handfuls of soil from an ecosystem that's different from your garden, say a forest or a meadow, and add it to your pile. This will help create microbe diversity in your pile and ultimately your soil, which will help make for healthier plants.

There are many more interesting ideas about how to improve soil health in *Building Soils Naturally*. Most of these involve more expensive and often hard to find ingredients. Professional landscapers (organic) will be very interested in Phil's suggestions because they must get superior results and often have a budget for buying soil amendments.

On the other hand, I've always felt that it doesn't make sense to spend more on your garden than it would to buy organic produce. Of course, it's tempting to invest in some of these ingredients when the benefit is ultra nutritious food.

Stay tuned for the next article. I'll be giving away my promotional copy of *Building Soils Naturally*.

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