THE TRUTH ABOUT GARDEN REMEDIES

For gardeners inclined to save a buck by concocting remedies with rotten eggs or chewing tobacco, or who automatically consult grandma's garden journal at the first sign of aphids -- this is the book for you.

Jeff Gillman's "The Truth About Garden Remedies: What Works, What Doesn't, and Why" (2006) lists a hundred or more remedies for everything from improving poor soil to killing weeds or bugs. He explains what each remedy consists of, how it's applied, and why it's supposed to work. Then he gives "the real story," an evaluation based on experimental data, ranging from "unlikely to be beneficial" to "likely to work if used properly."

Gillman is professor of horticultural science at the University of Minnesota, and when he cannot find evidence in the scientific literature that the remedy has been tested, he sets up his own experiments, carefully explaining what he's doing and why.

Also he gives some solid general gardening guidelines. Water slowly, to give soil particles time for absorption; remember that diseases and bugs seldom kill their hosts, which after all nourish them; note that phosphorus and potassium, often packaged with nitrogen in fertilizers, remain in the soil much longer, and thus don't need replenishing nearly as often.

Select disease and pest resistant varieties, plant them where they'll thrive, water and fertilize them properly, and you should have few problems.

Here's a sampling of Gillman's conclusions about several remedies many of us have probably tried.

Adding coffee grounds to acidify soil, though it contributes organic matter, doesn't affect pH; you're better off using agricultural sulfur.

Adding compost gets the highest marks for soil enrichment and water retention. It's especially important here, where the sun cooks soil nutrients away quickly.

Gypsum is useful where soils are high in sodium, as in many parts of the West. It increases calcium and sulfur without raising soil pH, and may be easily available in drywall scraps, which double as weed barriers.

What about micronutrient additives, often touted as miracle growth boosters? They're useful in containers with non-soil mixes, but organic fertilizers and compost contain all plants need.

How about seaweed and seaweed extracts? They get a feeble two stars, though my daughter once created a lush garden by applying truckloads of it – first carefully washed to remove the salt.

Vitamin B-1? Plants do use it, but make plenty themselves. Dish soaps will desiccate soft-bodied insects like aphids, but may harm plants, so insecticidal soaps are better.

Bringing in insect predators and parasites may have mixed results. Nematodes work well in warm soils. Ladybugs are fine in greenhouses – outdoors they may quickly fly off. Lacewings are voracious, as are Minute pirate bugs, Gillman's favorites, but bring them in before pest populations peak.

Tobacco may carry tobacco mosaic virus, deadly to geraniums and the nightshade family – tomatoes, etc. – so should never be used.

Corn gluten meal can work well as a pre-emergent herbicide, but only if applied 2-3 years running, meanwhile tolerating some weeds.

Bagging fruit against birds and insects, though time-consuming, works well. I use "maggot barriers," available commercially, for apples, peaches, etc., and lengths of discarded panty hose to foil birds on grapes.

Spraying water on trees, a light mist only, works to prevent frost damage; painting tar to heal tree wounds does not.

Gillman evaluates antitranspirants, hydrogels, packaged micorrhyzae, milk, Epsom salts, garlic, hydrogen peroxide and more. He lists deer-resistant plants, explains and ranks

commercial pesticides, and lists the preferred pH for common garden plants.

In short, his book provides a handy reference whenever we're faced with common garden problems, and it deserves a place in any gardener's library.

His take-home message? Take no remedy for granted; test it to see if it works for you, in your yard.