

A photograph of a man with a grey beard and glasses, wearing a blue denim shirt and a green apron, working in a garden. He is holding a black watering can and is watering a row of artichoke plants. The plants have large, green, serrated leaves and several artichoke heads are visible. In the background, there are other garden beds with yellow flowers and a wooden trellis structure. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

# **Austin OGs: Naturally, Of Course!**

Photo: Chris S. Corby

John Dromgoole, lifetime member of the Austin Organic Gardeners, has been a pillar in the Texas organic scene since before it was fashionable.



Their backgrounds are as varied as a bouquet of fresh cut flowers, but they all have one thing in common: Austin Organic Gardeners (AOG) enjoy doing what comes naturally. For going on 60 years, the Austin-based club has endured as a friendly touchstone for seekers of alternative gardening information. Longtime member John Dromgoole, owner of The Natural Gardener, an eight-acre nursery and soil yard on Old Bee Caves Road in Austin, attributes the organization's success to its unwavering focus.

"The Austin Organic Gardeners group serves as an educational tool more than anything else," notes Dromgoole, whose friendly voice offering practical advice is heard from 9 to 11 a.m. Saturdays on 590 KLBJ ("Gardening Naturally with John Dromgoole"). "As far as we can tell — and we've even been recognized as such — we're the oldest continuously meeting organic gardening club in the nation. The club, in order to survive this long, has followed two principles: one, it has stayed out of politics, and two, it has stayed out of religion. That way, you don't alienate anybody. We take a subtle, positive approach, and invite people to look at what we're doing. They see that it's a lifestyle. Fortunately, Austin is the type of town that is open minded and has been very receptive to our message."

Members are young and old, men and women, engineers, housewives, mail carriers, farmers, and teachers. Some grow vegetables while others favor flowers. Individual growers have special interests, such as herbs, ornamentals, bulbs, native plants and heirloom roses, to name a few. Most are hobby gardeners, or grow for their own consumption and enjoyment, while others depend on sales of what they grow for their living.

Tim Miller, who bears the distinction of being the only certified organic dryland farmer in Texas, owns and operates Mill-

berg Farms at Kyle, which has been cited for its water conservation efforts. Miller practices what he preaches. He offers organic produce through farmer's markets and regularly delivers fresh vegetables to customers participating in his CSA (Community Sustained Agriculture) program. AOG farmers Carol Ann Sayle and Larry Butler run Boggy Creek Farm, a Texas Department of Agriculture certified organic farm in the Austin city limits. Year-round on Wednesdays and Saturdays (9 a.m. to 2 p.m.) the farmers sell fruits and vegetables and processed organic tomato products from their onsite farm stand. Boggy Farm's field crops, such as hard squashes, tomatoes and potatoes, are grown at their Milam County farm northeast of Austin. Jan Kaune, Kaune Line Farm, raises and markets a variety of organically-grown vegetables at the Austin Farmer's Market on Saturdays. Kim and Gloria Alexander raise free-range chickens, turkeys and cattle on their farm, located east of Austin-Bergstrom International Airport. The Alexanders, who bring 80 or so dozen eggs to the Austin Farmer's Market each week, maintain an ingenious rolling chicken yard for their scores of layers that move to grassy patches every three days. Teenagers Isaac and Deborah Alexander pitch in and also make handcrafted items, such as woven baskets, mesquite spoons and other items sold at the Austin Farmer's Market with their mom's beeswax and pressed wildflower candles and farmstead soaps.

Some AOG members are seriously involved in other gardening activities and clubs. Venkappa Gani, for example, is a Travis County Master Gardener and a member of the Austin Organic Gardeners as well as the Austin Garden Club. Winner of the City of Austin's Green Garden award, Gani has created a fabulous suburban garden — 90 percent of which is devoted to edible plants — behind his South Austin home. Gani, who also has space for a composting operation and rainwater collection system, frequently teaches others how to

similarly create a beautiful, organic, sustainable, energy- and cost-efficient backyard garden. Ronda Disney shares her love of organic gardening with her students at Ronda's Montessori Garden. The children raise herbs and market them locally.

"It's neat to see how many well-versed people there are today. A lot of them came in when they were young, got excited, and they are still there — with gray hair now, like me," says Dromgoole. "What we do now have, as an organization, is 60 years of history in Austin using organic techniques. We have a good feel for what works and what doesn't work, without a lot of university research. We know what works here, and we can give solid regional organic gardening advice."

Dromgoole says AOG has also sent forth hundreds and hundreds of ambassadors who learned organic methods while in Austin and then moved to other parts of the state where they have taught, by example, others environmentally-friendly ways to manage trees, yards and vegetable gardens.

Dromgoole's store opened 18 years ago to fill a market niche for the growing interest in organic gardening products. Until The Natural Gardener came on the scene, many club members were making homemade plant food and bug control solutions from shared recipes.

"There just weren't that many natural products available. You could dig through any nursery and find bone meal or blood meal, but you had to know what you were looking for. I think the home remedies really helped the movement — grinding up grub worms and figuring out how many chilies were needed for pest control. That was part of the evolution of organic gardening. It has come full circle. They've quit making little things at home and go buy the Bt in a ready-to-use form and many other things you find on the market today."

Dromgoole is a lifetime member, and not as active as he was a decade ago, when he served as AOG president, but still helps

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BY LANA ROBINSON  
*Freelance Writer*

promote meetings and encourages others to join the club.

"I'm real supportive of them. We have a big annual party for them on their anniversary here at the store. We have the installation of officers, a meal and this year we had musical entertainment," notes Dromgoole.

A proud accomplishment during his term of office as president, says Dromgoole, is the establishment of a chemical clean-up day in Austin. With the assistance of another club member and the League of Women Voters, Dromgoole persuaded the city to organize a day where everyone could bring old fertilizer, paint, and other chemicals to a collection point.

"We did that for a couple of years in a row, and the city adopted it. Now, they have a permanent site. It's probably one of the things as a group, besides education, that we did that the city of Austin benefitted from," he notes.

Forrest Arnold, a veteran AOG member and the club's current president, is proud to be identified with the gardening entity. Arnold joined the club in 1983, soon after moving to Austin from

Houston, and has witnessed steady growth.

"We have about 100 member families," notes Arnold. "Membership dues are \$8 per household per year. This gets you a listing in the directory, a quarterly newsletter, a postcard containing meeting schedules, and the ability to purchase kelp, fish emulsion and row cover at wholesale prices."

The club's philosophy is simple, Arnold suggests. Human and animal health depends on the health of the soil that produces their food. Healthy soil, which is rich in organic matter, abounds with organisms that convert minerals in the soil into forms plants can use. The well-nourished plants growing in these soils are better able to defend themselves against attacks from insects, diseases and other pests.

Collectively, the club makes a significant difference in the community and the environment by promoting natural gardening techniques, but Arnold suggests the individual commitment of the gardeners is what makes the organization great. A lot of work goes on behind the scenes, he says.

"We have members like Russell

Kohlert, a long-time member who actually converted to organic from conventional growing after listening to Howard Garrett on the radio. Russell sets up tents at our annual plant sale and grows a good portion of the plants that we sell for this fundraiser. You can count on him. Russell is a workhorse."

Arnold says Yates Baretta, a relative newcomer, hit the ground running in the organization and calls members to coordinate various events and arranges executive meetings.

"We have many devoted members," adds Arnold.

## HISTORY

Members trace the organization's roots back to 1945 and point to Charles and Josephine Huntley as founders. The Huntleys, who had come to Austin three years earlier, were among the few who bucked the trend toward the emerging chemical fertilizers and pesticides, resulting from World War II slag, touted by "victory" gardeners of that era.

"They were just very concerned because as chemical fertilizers are added to soil, they destroy soil flora and fauna," recalls Joan Huntley, retired biology teacher and daughter of the late couple. "When it kills the organisms, the soil becomes toxic. Then the crumb structure dissipates, resulting in a packed down soil into which air and water cannot penetrate. That makes it tough for plants to survive. By continuing the organic matter and principles, the soil microbiology is such that the decaying matter and excrement from bacteria, protozoa and microscopic creatures produce a complement of humates and proteins. They are slightly sticky and tend to hold soil structure. Soil like that is sustainable."

In those early years, Huntley's parents searched without success for manure, straw, and other organic elements like those that had been readily available on their Vermont dairy farm. Before long, they met Sarah Penn Harris, an avid Austin gardener, who directed them to sources for seeds,



Photos: Lana Robinson

**Venkappa Gani collects rainwater to water his organically maintained landscape and garden.**



soil, manure and other supplies.

“It started out with them meeting at their desks at lunch. When it grew too big to continue to meet at lunch, they met at a library. It was during that time that they were instrumental in developing the Zilker Botanical Gardens,” says Huntley.

It was Harris who introduced Huntley’s father to composting. This information, in turn, was shared with other like-minded gardeners and farmers in the group.

“They would compost all the wet garbage,” Huntley recalls. “My father had quite an elaborate compost pit, with four sections in it. He would turn it into one and over to the next and then finished it in the fourth one. They also began doing some soil testing through the county Extension service. The club worked hand-in-hand with the county Extension. When Ted Fisher came in, he was not an organic gardener. He did not know about it. They educated him and by the time he left, he was very strongly organic.”

By the 1960s, interest and awareness in organic techniques had spread across the country. The Huntleys attended national conventions where they discovered the wonders of colloidal phosphate, thuricide, diatomaceous earth, kelp powder, fish emulsion and sources for ladybugs and mantids. Back home, these organic “necessities” could not be found, so Charles Huntley began ordering them and storing them in his garage to sell to members of the club.

“My father became the procurement officer for the club,” says Joan Huntley, an AOG member who remains a stalwart practitioner of the organic methods passed on to her by her late parents. “He would find and organize boxcar loads of material such as green sand and phosphate rock, and it would come to Austin where he would have a work crew offload whatever number of bags were required here. The rest would continue on to Malcolm Beck, who was in New Braunfels in those days, and is now in San Antonio.”

Huntley would break down 50-pound sacks of colloidal phosphate into smaller sizes for his garden club friends. Word quickly spread about the club and its fringe benefits and membership grew. Joan Huntley, who has served as an AOG vice president and is a volunteer spokesperson at various events, says the organization has remained true to her parents’ vision.

“It’s been a matter that as need arose among people here in town, then the organic gardeners try to meet that need,” she says. “The climate here in Austin — the intellectual climate — to receive sustainable agricultural methods and organics has a great deal to do with the Austin Organic Gardeners.”

Huntley, who returned to Austin from Massachusetts in 1991, says the AOG provides a forum for folks to learn how to sustainably grow food, how to grow more food in less space, and deal with the gardening problems unique to the region.

“Each meeting is educational, with a timely topic directed at something that’s going on in the landscape. Successful techniques are taught on an ongoing basis. It’s a great consciousness-raiser, and a place where people can come to get questions answered. You find tremendous support. You can bring a bug or a leaf and ask someone to help you figure out what’s going on. A lot of networking goes on,” she says.

Ginger Soulé was well acquainted with Charles and Josephine Huntley. In 1988, with her kids grown and out of the nest, Soulé wanted to get back to gardening. She didn’t want to join a specific plant club (i.e. rose society, iris society), but instead hoped to learn more about the basics of good gardening. So she turned to the Austin Organic Gardeners. Today, Soulé has a lovely, cherished urban flower garden with a few vegetables.

“I am a bulb enthusiast,” notes Soulé, who has sprinkled them liberally in her front yard landscape. “I keep trying things that aren’t supposed to grow here. I like daffodils and some of the mi-

nor spring bulbs, including the clusiana tulip, which is a species tulip originating in Persia. Like native Texas plants, some of the species bulbs do far better than hybrids here. Finding nurseries that carry things, especially that are grown here and not in Holland, is a challenge.”

Winter favorites, says Soulé, are members of the onion family — garlic, shallots, chives, and leeks. She also plants carrots, peas, spinach and various lettuces, along with chard and broccoli some years.

“I make as much compost as I can, but not nearly enough homemade compost for vegetables. I use commercial compost in my landscape,” she says. “I’m from an old line of gardeners. My great grandfather was Leander Taylor Beaty, an early nurseryman. His youngest daughter, Lily Beaty Brock, was my grandmother. She lived with my Mom and Dad and taught me a lot in that day and age about compost, horse manure, and leaf mold. We had a humongous victory garden, and we would go out and gather it in places where there was a forested area.”

For fall planting, Soulé will



**Organic gardeners don’t have to give up beauty and good design.**

work a couple of inches of her homemade compost into the soil and shape up vegetable beds. She typically lets her grass clippings remain on her front lawn, but since it has been a wet year, she has dried and bagged some of it to use for mulch.

Soulé has been busy caring for her young grandson recently, but hopes to resume her gardening club activities wholeheartedly once he is old enough for a preschool program.

"I have learned so much. The club is a place to keep up with research and new products on the market. Plus we share information among our members. At the end of each meeting, we have a Q&A session. We share information that way," says Soulé.

The Austin gardener, who has served as AOG vice-president, president and program chairman over the years, helped organize the first plant sale fundraiser, held annually on the first weekend in March in Zilker Park.

"We're chartered as an educational organization, not just a nonprofit organization. Our purpose is to disseminate information. We have, in the past, helped fund 'get growing, keep going' seminars, which helped teachers earn a science credit for continu-

ing education. Butterfly gardens and gardening programs are increasingly a part of their curriculum. And they include segments on various aspects of having gardening at school. There are many side workshops specifically geared to what teachers want."

Soulé is also one of several people in the club involved in community outreach. She serves on the governance council of Cedars International Academy, and shares her organic knowledge via the school's Life Sciences program.

"I helped in the vegetable gardening and helped establish their butterfly garden, along with other organizations. John Dromgoole has also donated compost for some of these school projects," she says.

Jim Grahs, immediate past president of Austin Organic Gardeners, and his wife Lexia, were introduced to organic methods in the early 1980s, when they started listening to Howard Garrett's radio program. They joined the local organic gardening club in 1995.

"The year we joined was right before the club's 50th anniversary," notes Jim Grahs, who currently serves on the AOG board of directors. "We thought that was

cool, and the people were nice. We met a couple of the old-time folks, Josephine Huntley, and some others. They were a nice friendly bunch of people and there are some excellent gardeners in there. Many are also members of other gardening clubs."

Like Soulé, gardening has been a family tradition for Grahs, who recalls planting onions and carrots in his backyard even as a preschooler. Today, Grahs plants ornamentals, including many native plants and antique roses, and a few vegetables on his 10-acre property between Bastrop and Lockhart.

"I also dabble in herbs. I have about 5,000 saffron bulbs. I don't grow commercially, but I bought 1,000 corms about 10 years ago. They are organic through neglect. A lot of gardeners are organic gardeners technically, because they don't do anything to them, but that's not true organic gardening," says Grahs.

Grahs obtained his saffron corms from Odena Glover Brannam, an author, educator and herb farmer from Dallas with over 40 years of experience in herbalism.

Grahs' motto is "the best thing you can put in your garden is your shadow." He favors organic gardening because of the improvements in the soil.

"If you're looking for a quick fix, you throw out fertilizer and water it in. It looks pretty good, but it's not improving the soil. Ten years down the road, you're no better off. With organics, you are continually improving the soil. It requires work on the front end, but the more you do it, the less you have to do," he suggests.

The Grahs work as a gardening team.

"Lexia is the instigator. She buys plants and I plug them," says Grahs.

Grahs looks forward to promoting his organic philosophy at the AOG's annual plant sale each March.

"It's the highlight of our year, our major fundraiser. I'm in charge of it for next year. Most seedlings we sell are grown by members of our club. We offer



**Austin Organic Gardeners grow a variety of crops from herbs to vegetables to ornamentals.**



some heirloom plants you won't find anywhere else, and it's an opportunity to educate people. The other big event is the Zilker Park Festival. We work the booth every year. It's an opportunity to meet people and answer questions for those who are curious about organics," Grahs explains.

But Grahs' influence is not limited to these events. As a mail carrier with a foot route in Austin's Travis Heights area, he has ample opportunity to share his organic gardening knowledge in passing.

"I make 500 deliveries a day,

and I talk to people from all walks of life. People will say, 'Jim look at this thing on my grass.' I'll take a look and if I recognize it, I direct them on some steps they might try. If I don't know, I tell them some people to contact. Generally, I encourage them to go organic first, because it's low impact, and that is extremely important to me. If you do stuff nontoxic, it is safer for your environment, your pets' environment, kids' environment, the neighbors' and the guys' downstream are all better. That's what I like as an organic grower. You can help in-

form people as easily as a one-on-one contact. It has a far-ranging effect, a ripple effect, because they also talk to somebody. And it may already be something they have been thinking about. They may decide to come to one of our meetings or buy a book as a result of a brief conversation," he suggests.

Whether working in the garden, educating the public, or simply talking with a neighbor, friend or relative, the Austin Organic Gardeners are making a difference, doing what comes naturally. **TG**

## RESOURCES

### *Austin Organic Gardeners Meeting & Membership Information*

The Austin Organic Gardeners meet monthly on the second Monday of the month (except December) at 7:30 p.m. The meetings are held at the Austin Area Garden Center in Zilker Botanical Garden, 2220 Barton Springs Road, (512) 477-8672 just east of the Mopac expressway. In addition to an educational presentation, there is a question-and-answer session and plenty of informative conversation. Members often bring seeds or plants to share. Visitors are welcome.

Membership dues are \$8 per household per year. Members are entitled to a listing in the club's directory, a quarterly newsletter, a postcard containing meeting schedules, and the ability to purchase kelp, fish emulsion, and row cover at wholesale prices.

For more information, contact Forrest Arnold at (512) 303-5190.

### *Organic Gardening Resources/Commercial Operations in Austin*

The Natural Gardener, 8648 Old Bee Caves Road, is an eight-acre location with a nursery and soil yard. Native plants, herbs, roses, perennials, annuals, vines, trees and shrubs are sold. The store offers organic amendments, fertilizers, tools, drip irrigation, books, gifts, pottery

and statuary. The Natural Gardener also carries bulk composts, soils, mulches and sands. Several display gardens, including a butterfly garden, herb garden, vegetable garden, orchards and a labyrinth. For more information, call (512) 288-6113, or visit [www.naturalgardeneraustin.com](http://www.naturalgardeneraustin.com).

Millberg Farms, 737 Opal Lane, in Kyle is a certified organic dryland farm and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation. Owner Tim P. Miller has won regional awards for his water conservation techniques, which have allowed him to farm successfully for 11 years without pumping a drop of aquifer water. In 1999, he won the Conservation Award for Water Conservation from the Barton Springs/Edwards Aquifer Conservation District. Miller offers subscription shares through his Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) operation for seasonally available produce, preferably to families, which he will deliver in the Kyle area. When crop abundance permits, he also sells at the Westlake Farmer's Market. Millberg Farms also offers gardening classes and does farm/garden consulting to area landowners. For more information, call (512) 268-1433.

Kim and Gloria Alexander, with help from their children, produce farm fresh eggs and pastured broilers, turkeys and

beef, using organic methods. To complement their operation, family members make handcrafted items for sale, such as mesquite spoons and pie cutters, beeswax candles, pressed wildflower candles, farmstead soaps and handwoven baskets. For more information, call the Alexander Farm at (512) 247-4455 or check their website at [www.alexanderfamilyfarm.net](http://www.alexanderfamilyfarm.net).

Larry Butler and Carol Ann Sayle sell USDA Certified Organic Produce at their Boggy Creek Farm stand in East Austin all year long on Wednesdays and Saturdays (9 a.m. to 2 p.m.). Most vegetables, with the exception of garlic and onions grown in winter and stored, and greens are picked fresh that day. Shoppers can also purchase organically-grown fruits, quality cheeses, milk, yogurt, eggs and other food products, including Larry's wide range of jams, smoke-dried tomatoes and sauces. Boggy Creek Farm is located at 3414 Lyons Road, Austin. Call (512) 926-4650; or visit the farm website at [www.boggycreekfarm.com](http://www.boggycreekfarm.com) for directions and more details.

A number of these local organic farmers participate in the Austin Farmers' Market on Saturdays (9 a.m. to 1 p.m.) and Wednesdays (11 a.m. to 2 p.m.) at 4th and Guadalupe in the park.