

## Organic Gardening Is It for Me?

You may have heard people talking about organic foods or organically grown plants, but what exactly does that mean? Would this be something that you want for your yard and gardens?

Well, basically, organic gardeners don't use synthetic fertilizers or pesticides. In organic gardening, you think of plants as part of a whole system within nature that starts in the soil and includes the water supply, people, wildlife, and even insects. "An organic gardener strives to work in harmony with natural systems and to minimize and continually replenish any resources that the garden consumes."

Begin with the soil. Supply high-quality manure and mulches regularly to add organic matter to the soil. A lot of organic gardeners rely on homegrown composts. They make it from decaying plant wastes. You may use grass clippings, leaves in the fall, or even vegetable scraps.

It is very important to choose plants that are suited to your zone and growing site. The plants that are best suited for the conditions and climate that you have will grow much more easily and with less care.

A concern when deciding to garden organically may be how to control the weeds. One of the most effective methods of weed control would be to mulch. You can use shredded leaves, straw, dry grass clippings, wood, bark chips, newspaper, or other degradable materials. Thick layers of mulch placed on the ground, like a blanket around the plants, help block the sun from the weeds. This helps to stop or slow the growth of the weeds. Mulch can also conserve moisture and build soil as it decomposes. Organic gardening does, however, require hoeing for already established weeds. Weeding can seem like an endless battle when you first start, but if you hoe faithfully, you will reduce their persistence. A stirrup or diamond style hoe is especially good for weeding because it slices off the weeds below the surface of the soil.

Should you be concerned about insects in your organic garden? Insects usually attack sickly plants or plants that are stressed. It is important to remember that some insects are beneficial to the garden. Gardening organically means working in harmony with nature. Even the insects that eat your plants are part of that system.

It is important to carefully watch what the insects are doing. Are they having a snack by nibbling on the plants or are they destroying the plants in an all out attack?

Making sure your plants are healthy and well suited to your site, as well as watered properly, will help create the strong plants that discourage destructive insects. It is very important to have natural predators in the garden also. Birds, frogs, lizards, and ladybugs will all be helpful in a garden since they control destructive insects. You can encourage these good guys by keeping a water source available for them and by not eliminating their food sources through the use of pesticides. Growing sweet alyssum or dill will attract beneficial insects and help keep them in the garden even after almost all of the pests have been eaten.

If there is a sudden invasion of pests, turn to natural products that won't harm humans, pets, wildlife, or beneficial predators. It is important that it is easily absorbed back into nature again.

Garlic or hot pepper sprays, as well as insecticidal soaps, work well against many pests.

*Bacillus thuringiensis* is a naturally-occurring bacteria. When you apply it to plants, it upsets the digestion of caterpillars or other leaf-eaters.

Fungal diseases of your plants can be lessened by providing proper air circulation and proper moisture. Plan enough room for mature plants. This will enable good air movement and moisture evaporation. If signs of disease occur, be sure to remove the leaves that are infected, or in some cases, it may be necessary to remove the entire plant.

Organic gardeners depend on nutrient-rich soil rather than chemical fertilizers. The soil becomes nutrient rich by adding compost. About an inch should be added every year. Animal manure, especially horse, cow, or chicken, is the best. If you need an immediate boost for your plants (especially those in containers), choose liquid fertilizer, such as fish emulsion or mineral-rich seaweed.

Now that you have a little background on organic gardening, you can better determine if this is what best fits your needs and goals when gardening.