

What Is Organic Gardening?

by Pat Dickey, Fairfax Master Gardener

Even though we now seem to hear about organic produce almost daily in the news or at the grocery store, it is not a new phenomenon.

Organic gardening is actually the way people gardened long ago, before synthetic chemicals were formulated, and when it was not important to buy perfect, blemish-free produce or to have a lush, green, manicured and weed-free lawn in the suburbs. The sad truth is that we were not aware of the harm we were doing to our properties and to ourselves by using synthetic chemicals. Many people are now realizing that it is better to work in harmony with nature, using products and practices that are often readily available to us to sustain our gardens. Our health and safety are far more important than a lawn or veggie that looks perfect.

The first step in gardening organically is to first improve the quality and fertility of the soil. Organic gardeners build the garden soil by adding compost that they have obtained or created from natural plant materials and decomposed animal manures that allow the garden to be sustainable and self-sufficient. Earthworms and microorganisms are better able to thrive in this rich soil and work to improve the soil structure. Water and oxygen can move more easily through the soil to nourish the roots of plants, since the additional organic matter slows soil compaction. The compost releases nitrogen at a slower rate than synthetic fertilizers, minimizing the stress in plants that can result in insect infestations and diseases. Plants can become healthy without the need for synthetic amendments and, as a result, there are no residues in the soil to cause harm to us or to the beneficial insects and animals that share our environment.



A beneficial insect: lady beetle larva

Photo: University of Nebraska
Department of Entomology

Insect control is another priority for organic gardeners. Beneficial insects such as lady beetles, lacewings, and ground beetles, as well as certain wasps and bumblebees, are important to the garden's ecosystem because they keep pests under control and pollinate vegetable plants. Organic gardeners draw beneficial insects to the garden by growing a variety of different vegetables, flowers, and herbs. Organic gardeners realize that whatever they use to treat an insect problem affects the other living organisms in the garden. Therefore, they avoid the use of synthetic pesticides. Instead, they use organic pesticides such as *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt) and other naturally occurring materials such as insecticidal soap and Neem oil. Some of these pesticides, however, are broad spectrum and may harm beneficial insects if not applied carefully. As an alternative, floating row covers can be an excellent barrier to keep insects away before they can cause damage to crops. Many vegetables, such as cabbage, kale, and other leafy greens, can remain covered during the entire growing season, and sunlight, air and water will penetrate the cloth covers. Row covers can also be used for seedlings when insect populations



Floating row cover on spring vegetables

Photo: University of Wisconsin Extension

are active and then removed later to allow for pollination when blossoms form.

Diseases in the garden can be a challenge for the organic gardener, but many can be controlled with good cultural practices that keep plants stress-free and healthy. Vegetable plants are more disease resistant when planted during recommended times during the season. Adequate watering with minimal wetting of leaf surfaces, weed control, proper fertilization with organic materials, and crop rotation will also prevent diseases. The garden area should be kept free of debris, and all garden tools and containers should be sterilized if diseases are suspected and before using them again. If pathogens are present, it is important to properly identify them. Often diseases are brought home with seedlings and are not preventable. Our Help Desk can help identify plant diseases, or gardeners can bring a sample of the infected plant to one of the many local plant clinics that are manned by masters gardeners at farmers markets and selected libraries throughout the summer.

By following organic gardening practices, you will have the peace of mind that you cultivated your fruits and vegetables in the healthiest and most sustainable way possible.

Educational Note

The Organic Materials Review Institute is an organization that certifies materials for use in organic gardening. The reviews are primarily for the commercial grower, but are useful for the home organic gardener. See their website for a complete listing.

OMRI.org

References

VCE Pest Management Guide, Home Grounds and Animals, 2015, Chapter 2 Home Vegetables:
[456-018-15-Home-grounds-and-animals.pdf](#)

Foster, Catharine Osgood (1972) *The Organic Gardener*

Martin, Deborah L (2014) *Rodale's Basic Organic Gardening: A Beginner's Guide to Starting a Healthy Garden*.

University of Missouri Extension, G6220 Organic Vegetable Gardening Techniques