

Organic Gardening

Organic gardening has been fostered in our society since man first started planting, rather than just gathering his food. In the beginning there wasn't much of a choice. If you gardened, you did it organically. What American doesn't remember how the Indians taught the founding Pilgrims how to use fish heads planted in corn seeded dirt mounds to produce better harvests. And thus, the first officially recognized composting was used. But organic gardening is more than just getting back to basics. It's a philosophy that appreciates the natural order of mother nature and allows her to help us grow superior tasting and healthy fruits, vegetables and other plants. Simply put, its using our knowledge of nature as a guide for our gardening activities without using synthetic chemical pesticides or fertilizers. In the wilds of the countryside, natural ecosystems make their own fertilizers. The circle of life is more than a catchy Disney cartoon song, it's the explanation of mother nature's master plan. This cycle of growth, death and decay is continuous. As plants and animals die, their bodies are consumed by the earthworms and microscopic soil creatures and nutrients are released back into the earth. In a natural environment, nature's predators and parasites help keep plant-eating insects in check. In your organic garden similar natural balances and cycles also exist. But because gardeners harvest their bounty, nutrients are removed from the soil, thus breaking the circle of life. Organic gardeners understand that this necessitates they add organic materials such as purchased organic soil amendments or compost to maintain the natural balance of their gardens. This also aids in producing a higher quality garden than those that that would randomly start up in the wild. Methods of planting with an eye towards biological diversity can also minimize the need for pesticides. When that does become necessary though, organic gardeners have many different natural tactics that have little impact on nature's ecosystems. Why People Like to Garden

Organically! In truth, there are probably as many reason to garden organically as there are stars in the skies. Here are just a few of the most popular reasons for taking the few extra steps and planning required to grow "mother nature's way." We hope that you'll contribute your own reasons as well by E-mailing Us with your comments. The Taste Factor! Food from the supermarket has nothing over freshly picked vegetables from your garden. The tastes are bolder and sweeter. You'd have to be taste bud deficient not to notice the remarkable difference. And that's not all, as taste has been nature's way of getting us to consume the good stuff, while leaving the bad stuff (bitter) alone. Fresh vegetables can't help but have more nutrients, thus making them more wholesome to consume. There's perhaps nothing more satisfying than having guests over and serving them something you grew yourself. Their exclamations of great taste will be heartfelt comments for sure! The Health Factor! As mentioned above, fresh vegetables often contain more nutrients than store bought ones that are picked, processed and finally begin their long journey to the distributions centers, then to your local supermarket. Fresh, Organic vegetables have even more advantages over those grown with artificial chemicals. The organic materials used to condition the organic gardens soil contain a more natural mix of nutrients along with larger quantities of regular and trace minerals than chemical fertilizers whose main goal is to produce big plants. Knowing exactly what chemicals were or WERE NOT used to produce what you eat is also a great contribution to one's peace of mind. Families with young children are especially cognizant of the effects of synthetic chemicals on their children's natural growth processes. The Cost Factor! As if taste and health weren't enough, some people just want to proclaim "show me the money!" Gardening of any type can be a great saver of money. Especially for large families on a budget. Has anyone not marveled at the huge amount of food that can be produced from just a single package of vegetable seeds? Utilizing the cost savings of planting from seed can make gardening practically dirt cheap! The desire to each healthier organic fruits and vegetables can lead to a very expensive grocery bill as you'll pay a premium for that piece of mind.

As with any endeavor though, there are ways you can end up spending more money than expected, even though organic gardening is tailor made for cost efficiency. You could buy organic fertilizers or use those soil building techniques like composting that utilize things you would have thrown away! If you plan well, organic gardening can save you much more money than gardening with synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Of course, both methods will save you a bundle that you'd otherwise pay to your local supermarket. The Increasing Cash flow Factor! From saving money, we now discuss using your organic garden to make you money. Often times you'll find yourself with a bigger bounty than you and your family can possibly eat yourselves. Friends will usually be more than happy to take them off your hands for you, but you can also sell your excess fruit, nuts and vegetables and pick up some extra help. The fact that you grew them organically will only be a plus to your prospective buyers. Whether you sell them on your own roadside stand, or sign up to sell at your communities local farmers market, there is always a way to turn your garden toiling into extra cash. The Ecology Factor! There is a great satisfaction in being part of the solution, rather than part of the problem. Organic gardeners know that their method of propagating delicious fruits and vegetables does no harm to their local environment. If anything, it helps by returning precious nutrients to the soil. True, most municipal rubbish collection does bury their trash, but very little decomposition takes place with disposal

methods. Researchers have bore drilled into old dumps and found newspapers dating back to the twenties that are perfectly intact. A testament to the lack of air which robs modern dumps of the natural decaying processes. On the off chance that there is some decay, not many plants will be able to utilize it from fifty to a hundred feet below the surface. Composting is an efficient and worthwhile way to dispose of organic waste that effectively limits the guilt factor of taking out the garbage. The Accomplishment Factor!

Organic gardening is a hobby that is not only fun, but productive. The fruit of your labors may actually be a fruit that you can eat. Or fresh, pesticide-free vegetables to feed your family. Your garden is a source of sustenance and healthy living for all those you care about. And best yet, when you are enjoying what you and mother nature produced you'll have the satisfaction of knowing it all happened because you decided it would. The admiration and appreciation of those who benefit from it can also be a source of great pride. The accomplishment of a natural organic garden, with all the bounty and beauty it provides is definitely something to feel proud about. The Excuse to Enjoy Nature Factor!

It is ingrained in our souls to find nature beautiful. With the sun shining and fresh air filling your lungs with each deep breath, is it any wonder why many people feel this is the primary reason they decide to start a garden. Many gardens are designed with areas that allow you to sit back, relax and enjoy the beautiful things you've helped create. For those who are cooped up in offices all day, breathing recirculated air and being bathed only in fluorescent light, a day in the garden can be excellent way to invigorate the body, mind and soul! What's Wrong With Using Chemical Fertilizers?!

Chemicals themselves are the building blocks of the entire planet. It's the origin and composition of the chemicals used in gardening that most organic gardeners are watchful of. Naturally occurring chemicals usually are part of a delicate balance of elements which the circle of life tends to dictate and regulate. The chemical mixes of most synthetic fertilizers are designed to produce larger and greater quantities without regard for the nutrients nature intended to use to produce a quality plant. They are quick-acting, short-term growth boosters that are detrimental to the soil. Chemical fertilizers can destroy beneficial soil life like earthworms, and other microscopic organisms essential to the natural chemical processes of good garden earth. Synthetic fertilizers in particular can contain acids like sulfuric and hydrochloric which increases the acidity of the soil significantly. The change in soil (pH) can have a ripple effect that not only affects the plant, but the good organisms present as well. Increased acidity often results in the need to add additional organic material to the soil, or lime. Fertilizers that result in higher acidity also cause another problem. It dissolves the cementing material that is naturally occurring due to the accumulation of dead soil organism bodies. This is the stuff that makes rich earth crumbly and holds the rock particles together. When the top layer becomes a surface made primarily of rock particles, water tends to run off rather than be absorbed deeply into the soil. Some fertilizers are so highly soluble that they are often leached away into ground water sources too quickly to benefit the plants significantly. A type well known for this effect is the 5-10-5 mix which also can react with deeper levels of clay and create an impervious layer of solids known as "hardpan." Continued use of chemical fertilizers can dramatically reduce the amounts of trace minerals in the plants you produce as well as having detrimental effects on the soil and its organisms. The imbalance of materials in these fertilizers can actually hinder the plants ability to absorb these minerals from the soil. It does so by disturbing the natural delivery system that gets these trace minerals to the plants root hairs. Most people who are first introduced to the concepts of organic gardening are shocked to hear that their regular routine of chemical fertilization has altered the biological balance of their soil. Most of these conditions though can be reversed by using the knowledge we hold of nature's plan and how the soil fits into that plan. A basic principal in nature is that no one thing can be changed without affecting some other organism or ecosystem. Although chemical fertilizers may seem like a quick fix, the result is usually potentially long-term damage to the soil, decreased nutritional value of the plants produced in it, and the introduction of disproportionate amounts of chemicals into our groundwater supply. It All Begins With the Soil!

Like the foundation of a house, organic gardening relies on good soil that is rich in organic material and nutrients. It is so essential that you may even want to get your soil tested by a laboratory, although there are other home tests you can purchase that a good job of approximating an understanding of the land. Testing is more important for those who need to restore soil after years of chemical fertilizer and pesticide use. Those inheriting a healthy and thriving organic garden need not always have their soil analyzed. If you do test your soil, we suggest you get a complete work up that includes the, pH balance, primary nutrients (N-P-K), secondary nutrients (Calcium, Magnesium & Sulphur) as well as for trace minerals. At bare minimum, you need to have the pH factor tested. A neutral pH level of about 7.0 is desirable. Chemical fertilizers and pesticides may have altered the pH level to an unhealthy point. Soils that are alkaline are sometimes referred to as "sweet," while more acidic soils are called "sour" by gardeners in the know. To decrease soil acidity, you may have to add a light application of Calcitic Limestone (calcium carbonate) or Dolomitic Limestone (calcium-magnesium carbonate) to adjust the pH levels. Use Dolomitic only if your soil tests that it has a magnesium deficiency. If used with caution and in limited amounts, wood ashes can also be used to raise your soils pH level. They contain about 70% calcium carbonate along with potassium, phosphorus and trace minerals. Don't over use though as it can create soil

imbalances. Never use more than 12 pounds per 500 square feet and you should be fine. To decrease the alkaline content of your soil, elemental sulphur is most commonly used. The amount needed for your soil condition will be unique so it's best to use the soil lab's recommendations as to the amounts to add. If you haven't started your own compost heap yet, you can still buy commercially produced compost to add to your soil. Compost is a very valuable player in soil improvement or restoration, but it is not all that is needed. Depending on your test results, you may need to add other naturally occurring materials to properly condition the soil. Manure makes for a good natural fertilizer, although there are other organic preparations available. Choose whatever adds the nutrients your soil is most deficient in. Most soil testing laboratories will provide you recommendations as to what additives you'll need to add. Substitute organic sources for chemical ones they may suggest. There are also some nonscientific tests you can perform yourself to get a general idea of your lands condition. To test your soils drainage, dig a hole about a foot deep and about seven inches wide. Fill the hole with water and let it drain into the soil. Immediately afterwards, fill the hole again with water and note how long it takes for the water to again be absorbed into the soil. If it takes longer than eight hours, your soil has problems with drainage that warrant your attention. To test for soil retention, a good method is to water an area quite thoroughly. A couple of days later, digs a whole about six inches deep where you had watered before and feel the bottom for moisture. If it is already dry, then you need to take steps to improve your soils water retention. You can determine your soils texture by waiting a couple of days after a rainy spell, taking a loose clump of dirt in your hand and gently squeezing it between your fingers. Clay dominant soils will feel slippery, silt feels like moist talcum powder and sand will feel gritty. When you release your grip it should crumble which would indicate a decent mixture of textures. If it remains in a ball, there is probably a good amount of clay in it. If you can shape it and suddenly have the urge to make your own pots there may be high clay content. Add the necessary organic material (compost) and natural fertilizers in the appropriate quantities and work them into your soil as deeply as possible. Pitch forks are great for this as well as large shovels. Work it in as evenly as possible, removing stones and large debris as you find them. Some people dig in routine patterns which allow them not only to cover the whole garden area, but also redistribute the soil across a given area. This can help to redistribute soil nutrients and minimize the deficiencies that problem spot soil may have. Remember not to pack the soil down too firmly when you're done. Plant and the micro organisms in the soil need that air for life. Packed soil just makes their access to it more difficult. If your garden soil reconditioning comes too late in the growing season to start planting, because the first frost is coming on too quickly, you may have the opportunity to create a little "green manure." This is a term used to describe the growing of a temporary ground cover crop like Rye grass that will eventually be turned over, providing more organic material and nutrients for the next spring garden. This method is also good for providing food for earthworms and micro organisms. Other good green manure candidates are Crimson Clover, Hairy Vetch, Soybeans, White Clover (Dutch), Buckwheat, Winter Rye and Oats. Using a combination of plants is best. If you live where winters are mild, you may grow this natural carpet all winter long, plowing it under a few weeks before planting will begin. If winter announces itself in your neighborhood with a killing frost, followed by mounds of snow, you can just leave your temporary ground cover be and it will act as a natural insulation. Other plants like carrots, turnips, parsnips, horseradish and other root crops can remain in the ground if it is properly insulated. This can be achieved using a heavy mulch made up of leaves loose hay or straw as a ground cover before the first frosts begin. This also can be a beneficial delay of the inevitable for good soil critters like earthworms as it will give them more time to burrow deeper into the soil for winter.

Managing Your Gardens

Pests! Bug infestations can be quite distressing to any gardener. The organic gardener knows not to take it personally. The legions of insect invaders attacking their beautiful garden are just doing what comes naturally. We don't tend to our gardens though for the benefit of bugs. Well,... not that bad ones anyway. There are actually many insects that are quite beneficial and necessary for the good health of your organic garden. Good bugs include earthworms, centipedes, millipedes, ground beetles, ladybugs and most rove beetles. Each has its advantages that range from soil conditioning to eating the plant destructive bugs up. The problem with most chemical pesticides is that they tend to kill everything indiscriminately, taking some of our good bug buddies with them. There are many alternatives to the "vengeance is mine" attitude that envelopes many gardeners dealing with an infestation. The best way to manage the bad bugs is to plan ahead. Healthy plants attract less insects, a diverse plant species mix designed to discourage bad bugs can be utilized, and tricks that will attract the good predator bugs are your best defense. Advanced planning of your garden's layout will solve many potential problems. The trick is to maintain a natural balance of good to bad bugs so that the word infestation isn't even part of your vocabulary. If things get too out of hand though, there are natural predator bugs you can purchase that will help you bring things back in line. There are also organic pesticides you can purchase or mix up yourself, but these should be your last resort. Planning which plants to include in your garden can have many beneficial affects for reducing unwanted pests. Some varieties actually ward off certain pests because of the way they smell, taste or physical characteristics they possess. Putting them next to plants that could use such a natural deterrent is one way to let mother nature do the job. Another is to include species whose leaves, flowers or roots can actually be made into natural pesticide recipes that will attack a particular type of insect infestation without having the toxic side effects of synthetics. Certain plants can also be beneficial

for and attract good bugs and other predators. If you haven't gotten the idea yet, taking the time to plan ahead can save you a lot of grief in the future. You can also use physical means to control the bad bug population. The easiest example of this is to bar the path the bad bug use to your plants. By sprinkling diatomaceous earth around the stem bases of your plants, you make a very rough surface for tender-bellied snails and slugs to cross. Or you could put old panty hose over cantaloupes (or vegetables too) to create a physical barrier against common bugs. These are but a few of the ingenious methods organic farmers have been using for years to discourage bad bugs, all without using pesticides. There are many Various Methods and techniques used in Organic Pest Management (OPM), too many to list in one article. For brevities sake, you will find as many of these specific techniques as we can find listed in our GreenWeb Gardening Articles. Ode to Those Bad, Bad Bugs! They

were happy bugs, they were active bugs,
 They were pests through and through.
 I had no beef with them personally,...
 but I resented how they'd just chew and chew!

Now they're in buggy heaven
 with nary an organic gardener in site.
 My plants are using their old bodies for food
 and thus you may see my plight.

For what should I tell my chemical using friends,
 so determined to kill the enemies they see,
 For to me to use such harsh toxic poisons,
 will eventually put those chemicals in me!

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