

# Eat Green! How to Grow Your Own Organic Fruit and Vegetables

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Organic gardening differs from "conventional" gardening mainly in the areas of fertilization and pest control. Organic gardening is planting without chemical fertilizers and naturally building the soil to support healthy plant life. People are increasingly aware that organic food is better for the environment. This primer of organic gardening will help you get started in this fun, healthy hobby.

The main thing to remember is that organic gardening is not only about pesticide use and the soil that your garden grows in. The goal is to create an ecosystem in your back yard where every part is respected and in good shape. Robust plants can better defend themselves against pests and diseases.

## Soil Is the Source of Life

The soil is the source of life for plants. Indeed, one of the problems with chemical gardening is that it sterilizes the soil and steals the life from it. Organic soil is living, and has lots of living matter in it. It is from this wellspring of life that plants create the nutrients you will eat.

At the beginning and end of every growing season, the organic gardener works the soil by adding natural garden fertilizers to enrich the soil and replace nutrients that the plants have used. You can use animal-based organic fertilizers and plant-based organic fertilizers or any combination of both. You want to add bulk to the soil along with nutrients.

## Animal-Based Organic Fertilizer

Animal-based organic garden fertilizer can be reduced to one word: manure. Cow manure, chicken manure, fish emulsion and bat guano are most usually used, but you can additionally use horse and rabbit manure. Use solid animal-based fertilizers to dig into the soil, and make "manure tea" to use when transplanting seedlings.

There are some safety issues to recognize when using animal manure. All manure should be aged or composted before using it as an organic garden fertilizer to remove E. coli and other potentially troublesome pathogens. As well, you cannot use manure from humans or predator animals, such as cats. Their digestive systems contain bacteria that are pathogenic to humans, and the bacteria can get into or on food grown in soil fertilized with their feces.

## Plant-Based Organic Fertilizer

Compost, seaweed, worm castings and green manure are the most standard plant-based organic garden fertilizers. Seaweed and kelp are usually purchased as dried and processed organic garden fertilizer.

Green manure is planted as a cover crop, normally in the fall after harvest. Plant a nitrogen-fixing crop, such as soybeans, and the symbiotic bacteria in the roots will add nitrogen to your soil. Then,

when the cover crop emerges in the spring, dig it into the ground, and allow the plants to decompose and enrich the soil.

## Compost

Far and away the most common plant-based organic fertilizer is compost. Compost is an excellent way to recycle vegetable matter. There are many theories on composting, and you can learn how to do it from community workshops, books, or other experts. Fundamentally, however, compost is not hard to make. You just save all your vegetable scraps, garden wastes, remains of plants, grass clippings, dried leaves and other vegetable matter and let it decompose. A hot compost heap that is turned frequently (so that it gets air into it) will make compost in a matter of weeks. A compost heap decomposes faster if it generates heat, and it needs to be at least three cubic feet to get good and hot. If your compost pile isn't that big or doesn't get very warm, or you don't turn it, don't despair, it will still make good compost. You can just throw your vegetable waste in a pile and leave it. If it sits for a long time, like a year, it will compost by itself.

A worm box is an alternative to a compost-pile. Worm castings are very rich in nutrients. To create worm castings, start with the right kind of worms, which you can get from any organic gardening source. Place them in a covered tub of some kind with your slightly damp vegetable matter. The worms do all the work, and you get rich organic garden fertilizer at almost no cost. Either read about how to set up a worm compost system, or you can buy a kit at your garden center. Remember to add earthworms to the soil too, as they create natural fertilizers in the soil and provide aeration.

Add natural fertilizers such as these to the soil at least twice a year and dig them into the top six inches of soil. You'll have rich, dark, productive soil within a couple of years--even if you started out with sterile, gray, chemically treated dirt.

## Water Is a Necessity of Life

All living organisms need water. It is important for the health of your plants to give them enough water to thrive. However, indiscriminate water use wastes water and washes away the soil. Watering where it is not needed encourages weeds. Water when the sun is low, early in the morning or in the evening to cut down on evaporation. It is important that the water gets to the roots of the plants without running off and taking valuable soil with it, so add water slowly and let it soak in. Use a soaker hose to water only your garden plants and nowhere else. If a soaker hose (or irrigation system) is not a choice for you, dig a shallow well around the base of each plant and fill it up and let the water soak in. Use a mulch around plants to conserve water and to prevent rain from eroding your fertile garden soil.

## Don't Let Weeds Rob Your Garden Plants

Only your cherished plants should get the advantage of the rich soil and water you provide. Therefore, it is necessary to take out all the other plants which find your garden a great place to live. That is, it is important to weed your organic garden. In the mid-twentieth century, at the height of chemical use in gardening, it became usual to spray herbicides on the soil to control weeds. But now we understand how damaging such chemical use is to the environment. Pulling out weeds by hand is neither hard nor particularly time consuming. Your organic garden is a beautiful place to spend time, why not spend it taking out the weeds that compete with your plants.

Here are the basics of weed-control. Firstly, make sure you get rid of weeds before they go to seed. Weeds routinely produce thousands of seeds in a short period of time. If there are patches of weeds growing at the periphery of your garden, make sure to mow them before they spread seeds. Second, when pulling weeds by hand make sure to pull out the roots so the plant doesn't grow right back. Use a trowel to dig out deep-rooted weeds. Third, use mulch as a barrier to weed growth. Organic mulch will also help maintain moisture and add organic material to the soil. You can cover the entire area with plastic during the winter season to kill off weed seeds.

### Control Pests without Harmful Pesticides

Pest-control is probably the biggest issue facing organic gardeners. Chemically-based pesticides are some of the most toxic substances to have on your food or polluting the environment. How, then, do you keep ravenous bugs like Japanese beetles from destroying your produce? In organic gardening you begin with the least toxic intervention and proceed from there.

### Pest Prevention

The first step is to plant wisely. Remember that healthy plants will need less help from you with fighting pests, so make sure that your plants are well-fed and have adequate water. Also, use companion planting and crop rotation to discourage pests before they arrive. Some plants keep bugs away and planting them next to your tasty plants is a good idea. Garlic, onions and marigolds are commonly used to repel bugs. Plant them in a border around your garden and between your garden plants. Crop rotation is the method of planting a different crop in a given area of your garden each year. Where you put tomatoes this year put squash or corn in the next year. Crop rotation is especially helpful in preventing plant diseases.

### Non-toxic Pest Controls

The next step is to remove pests when you find them. Remember that not all bugs are pests. In fact, a number of bugs are your helpers in pest control, but the wholesale use of toxic pesticides eliminates the predatory bugs as well as the harmful ones. It is important to be able to identify the good bugs and the bad bugs. Go out early in the morning or late in the evening when it's cool, and remove any tomato hookworms, potato bugs, Japanese beetles, slugs or other harmful insects that you find. Squash them, or carry a bucket of soapy water to drown them. Better yet, feed them to your chickens. The most efficient way to remove small bugs such as aphids and mites is to spray the plants with the hose, using a strong stream of water to wash the insects off.

Physical barriers are another non-toxic method of organic pest control. They prevent pests from getting access to your plants. Some examples of barriers are to cut the top and bottom out of coffee cans and push them into the soil around tender young plants to keep cutworms away, or use fine netting to cover your plants to protect them from grasshoppers or birds.

### Predatory Insects

One of the biggest defenses against pests are other bugs. Bugs that eat other bugs are a fantastic organic gardening pest control. Ladybugs, praying mantises, and lacewings are all beneficial insects. You can buy them at the garden store and release them into your garden. These predatory insects control aphids, mites and many other pests. Most spiders are bug-eaters, too, so let spiders work for you.

## Using Organic Pesticides

If you are using these non-toxic pest controls and you are still faced with an overwhelming pest invasion, the last resort is to use organic pesticides. They are routinely made from plant derivatives or minerals. These natural pesticides are certified for use in natural farming and are far less dangerous than synthetic pesticides, but they are still toxic. It is important that you determine how harmful the insect pests are; you may elect to live with them rather than use something that is organic, but more toxic than you want to expose your food to.

Insecticidal soap is quite safe for food plants and the environment and works well to get rid of garden pests. Buy it at your garden supply store, or make your own by adding a few drops of liquid dish soap to a cup of water. Spray it on the plants, and then rinse off. This works great on aphids and thrips.

You can usually tell how toxic an organic pest control is by checking for a warning label. If there is no warning on the label, the substance is probably non-toxic. If the label says, "caution," it is mildly toxic. "Warning" on the label means it is moderately toxic, and "danger" means the substance is very toxic. Organic gardening pest controls rarely have a "danger" warning on them. It is very important to apply organic pest control products exactly as the label directs. These products can be dangerous, so they must be used correctly to minimize everybody's exposure to toxic pesticides.

### For More Information

If you want to get started on your organic garden, you'll find an abundance of help. Look for gardening clubs or workshops in your community; gardeners are always eager to give advice. Additionally, there are countless books, magazines and web sites. You can also look up your local Cooperative Extension Office, which offers advice in cooperation with local universities. Like all living processes, there is a rhythm to organic gardening. You don't do everything at once. Begin slowly and learn as you go.

**About The Author--** Steve Dolan loves to garden and is blessed with green fingers. Take a look at [Organic Garden | Organic Vegetables](#) to make the most of your garden. Also visit [Home Improvement | Home DIY](#) for home improvement ideas.

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