

Organic Gardening 101:

How to Start Gardening Organically

Learn organic methods for gardening, from fertilizer to pest control

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Organic gardening is more than simply growing food without synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. It is a comprehensive, holistic approach to gardening in a way that maintains and supports a healthy, balanced ecosystem and biodiversity—in your own yard and beyond.

Whether you are a first-time gardener who is intent on growing everything organically from the get-go, or whether you are transitioning from conventional gardening with pesticides and fertilizer to organic growing methods, here are steps you can take to garden organically.

Why Start Gardening Organically?

There are many compelling reasons for organic gardening. When you eat homegrown organic fruits and veggies, you are avoiding ingesting pesticides used to grow the food. Broad-spectrum synthetic pesticides also indiscriminately get rid of all the insects in your garden (pests as well as beneficial insects), which can cause significant disruption to biodiversity and the local food web.

Synthetic fertilizers are created with much higher concentrations than organic fertilizer and often result in nitrogen and phosphorus runoff, contaminating natural water sources and resulting in the overgrowth of algae in bodies of water.

Organic gardening can allow crops to grow naturally, using alternative means of pest control and fertilization without the same risks as non-organic methods.

Getting Your Organic Garden Started

Amend the Soil

It all starts with the soil. To prepare it for crop planting, it needs to be amended with [organic matter](#), which can be done [with a rototiller](#) or a shovel. When a farm wants to be certified as "USDA Organic," it is only allowed to add accepted plant and animal materials, including raw animal manure, composted plant and animal materials, and uncomposted plant materials, to the soil for three years.¹

As a home gardener, you are not bound to these rules or long time frame, and the time you should wait also depends on what was in that spot before. If it was an often-treated lawn or a farm field that was regularly and heavily treated with synthetic chemicals, you need to wait longer than if you are clearing a previously untouched patch of land for a vegetable garden.

Choose Easy Crops

When selecting crops for your first organic gardening season, it is important that you start with easy ones. Skip any crops that are highly susceptible to pests or diseases, such as cauliflower and broccoli. You can always grow those later, once you have some experience with which insect pests appear in your garden--and how to rid them organically.

Get Your Supplies Ready

Research and line up suitable organic fertilizers and any other recommended products you may need to protect your plants, such as row covers and organic pesticides.

Follow Golden Gardening Rules

Before you begin, take the time to test your soil. By taking a soil sample to your local university extension, you'll learn about your soil's make-up--the pH, as well as the nutrients available in the soil. A soil test report makes recommendation about how to amend your soil to ensure it supports your garden's nutritional needs. Once you understand the composition of your soil, you can determine if you need to amend it organically before the growing season begins.

Like in conventional gardening, it is crucial that you follow the rules of crop rotation to prevent pests and diseases. And, although it is less based on hard facts, it is helpful to understand the interactions between plants, so familiarize yourself with companion planting.

Attract Pollinators

Make sure to plant pollinator flowers in time so they bloom at the same time as plants that require pollination, such as zucchini, cucumbers, and pumpkins, to attract bees and other pollinators.

Take Good Care of Your Garden

Keep your plants healthy by leaving enough space between them for good air circulation (to prevent the spread of fungal diseases) and weed, water, and fertilize regularly. Consider installing drip irrigation to avoid splashing soil and water on the plants when watering, which can lead to disease.

Conventional vs. Organic Seeds

Organic seeds tend to be more expensive than conventional seeds, but seed companies often sell both types. There are two advantages to using organic seeds: first, organic seeds are grown following stricter regulations for the use of agricultural chemicals so by [buying organic seeds](#), you are indirectly contributing to efforts to protect native habitats, waterways, and local ecosystems. Also, organic seeds have been developed to work best in organic gardens in terms of yield and disease resistance.

Organic Means of Fertilizing

There are oodles of organic fertilizers on the market, from [fish emulsion](#) to [blood meal](#). Which commercial fertilizer you use, when, how much, and how often depends on the crops you grow. The Organic Materials Review Institute (OMRI), an international nonprofit organization, releases an annual list of products for organic production. You can either select products from the list or check if the product has the “OMRI Listed” label on the bottle or bag.

Organic Pest Control Options

In organic gardening, the same two rules apply as in conventional gardening: [using a pesticide](#), organic or conventional, should always be the last resort. And, secondly, never apply a product unless you know what you are combatting. Indiscriminately applying any pesticide does more harm than good.

[Neem oil](#) and [diatomaceous earth](#), although they are organic products, are quite powerful and should be used with the same caution as any other pesticide. Often, beneficial insects such as [leafcutter bees](#) cause minor damage to plants that is purely cosmetic and does not need any treatment at all. And although a product is labeled an organic pesticide, it can still harm or kill beneficial insects. Make sure to use any organic pesticide according to the directions on the label.

Tip

Once you have identified the pest problem, there are many different organic pest control options. Just like for fertilizer, choose products based on their OMRI listing.

Organic Compost Options

[Composting](#) is an important part of organic gardening. There are two things to keep in mind, though. Mature compost is an excellent way to add organic matter to the soil, but because its nutrient makeup is unpredictable, you should not rely on it alone for fertilization. For successful organic gardening, you still need organic fertilizer with a stable N-P-K ratio and other micronutrients that your plants might be lacking.

Take into consideration what you add to your compost bin. You don't have to fill it with only organic vegetable scraps, as any chemicals used on conventionally-grown produce break down during the composting process. However, be aware there are four persistent herbicides that do remain in the compost.²

[Persistent Herbicides FAQ](#), US Composting Council.

Don't Limit Organic Gardening to Edibles

An organic vegetable garden is a great start, but gardening sustainably and being mindful of the environment should not stop there. It does not serve nature if you have a fully organic vegetable garden next to a lawn treated with herbicides for weed control.

Reconsider the size of your lawn and maybe replant it with native grasses. Add more [native plants](#) to your landscape, which are not only better adapted to your local climate but are also essential for insects to survive. Starting a [pollinator garden](#) and [growing milkweed for monarch butterflies](#) is only one of the many things you can do to support biodiversity and a healthy local ecosystem and your vegetable garden at the same time.