

What is Organic Gardening?

A basic definition of organic gardening is "gardening without synthetic fertilizers and pesticides." However, it is much more than replacing manmade chemicals with those derived from natural resources. It is a philosophy of gardening that isn't just about making plants grow without chemicals. In an organic yard or garden, the emphasis is on working in the ecosystem in a manner that sustains and nourishes plants, soil microbes and beneficial insects.

Creating this ecosystem begins with improving the soil. Adding organic matter by mixing compost into the soil increases its capacity to retain water and nutrients and supports beneficial microbes, which are essential to healthy plant growth. Compost can be made from grass clippings, leaves, yard debris (such as weeds), kitchen scraps (such as vegetable and fruit peelings, eggshells, and coffee grounds), or purchased from garden centers and mulch suppliers (such as mushroom compost). Another way to add organic matter to the soil is to grow cover crops and turn them into the soil just as they begin to flower. More farmers and gardeners are now crushing the cover crops and planting without tilling. The cover crop thus becomes a mulch that can confuse pests and add nutrients to the soil as it decomposes. Cover crops that can be seeded in the fall include buckwheat, cowpeas, millet, and soybeans.

While compost and organic matter will increase your soil's ability to hold nutrients, organic gardeners also have to provide fertilizers derived from natural sources such as animal manures and byproducts, natural deposits such as rock phosphate, and plant products like seaweed and wood ash. Most retailers that carry garden supplies also stock organic fertilizers.

Another natural product that can be added to the soil is agricultural lime which is made from naturally occurring limestone. It is used to raise the soil pH if your soil is too acidic. Soil pH levels can vary in any area, and many do not require lime. To find out if your soil needs additional lime to support healthy plant growth, you can get a soil test kit from the county extension service to send in a sample to Rutgers University for testing. Kits cost \$20.

Organic gardeners practice natural pest control. They don't try to eliminate all insects and diseases from their gardens. They try to keep them below damaging levels. One of the main methods for keeping pest populations below damaging levels is to encourage thriving populations of beneficial insects and pest predators, including spiders, bats, birds, lizards, and toads. The two most important things you can do in your garden or yard to support these helpful species is to plant a wide variety of plants and flowers and avoid using synthetic pesticides, which are especially damaging to beneficial insects. Practicing good sanitation is another method of organic pest control. Removing disease infected leaves or plants, rotating crops so you are not growing the same type in the same spot year after year, and handpicking insect pests and eggs all help to suppress pest populations.