Quick and ‘Dirty’ Guide to Organic Gardening

Have you ever wondered how a forest thrives with no extra help from added fertilizers or chemical sprays? Nature has found a balance in a living, diverse ecosystem that allows a wide variety of plants and other organisms to prosper in relative harmony. The goal of organic gardening is to come as close as possible to achieving a similar balance and harmony in our gardens. Following are some basic steps to help you realize that goal.

SOIL, SOIL, SOIL

Soil health is the single most critical issue in a successful organic garden. Healthy soil means healthy plants. Healthy plants mean less opportunity for problems of any kind. Work constantly on your soil tilth (texture/composition). This is best done in four ways:

• **Add enormous amounts of organic (plant) matter** to the soil. This will improve water-holding and oxygen capacity, improve drainage ability, supply micronutrients and encourage microbial activity. Good sources of organic matter include: **good compost**, herbicide-free grass clippings, aged manures, leaves (especially shredded or partially decayed), and shredded vegetable matter.

• **Work your soil gently but deeply** to loosen soil that has been compacted over the course of the season. You can do this by digging, double digging, tilling, and/or making raised or hilled beds.

• **Plant cover crops**. Over the winter or when you are not using a part of your garden in the summer cover crops provide excellent sources of organic matter and nitrogen. (See accompanying handout.)

• **Be patient** - it’s a gradual process. Fertilize with slow-release organic fertilizers while you’re growing your soil. Slow-release fertilizers optimize the rate at which plants receive nutrients while avoiding over-feeding or excessive leaching of nutrients.

CULTURAL PRACTICES THAT ENCOURAGE A HEALTHY GARDEN ECOSYSTEM

• **Avoid monocultures**. Diversity is healthy; use a wide variety of plants.

• **Choose plants carefully** so that they are suited to their location.

• **Rotate garden crops** from year to year to deprive over-wintering diseases/pests of their host crop.

• **Plant resistant varieties** when possible.

• **Encourage natural predators and beneficial insects** by planting host plants, providing water.

• **Build your soil!**

INSECT IDENTIFICATION AND CONTROL

Knowing which insects are beneficial - and how to control the harmful ones using the least intensive method - is the core of organic insect control. Learn to observe your garden carefully so you can catch and deal with problems before they become crises. (See accompanying handout.)

WEED CONTROL

Successful weed control can significantly enhance the pleasure and productivity of your garden. Learn how your weeds spread so you can use effective removal methods. Once you have control, maintenance, while essential, is much less time-consuming. Six effective organic weed control methods (see accompanying handouts for details) are:

1. Persistent, timely removal
2. Mulching, mulching, mulching!
3. Cover cropping
4. Shallow cultivation in weed-free areas
5. Time cultivation to avoid watering times
6. **DO NOT ALLOW WEEDS TO GO TO SEED**

FURTHER READING:

- Peaceful Valley Farm Supply Catalog [www.groworganic.com](http://www.groworganic.com)
- Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening, Rodale Press
- Vegetable Garden Problem Solver, Rodale Press
- National Gardening Association [www.garden.org](http://www.garden.org)
- Handbook of Natural Insect and Disease Control, Rodale Press
- Flower Garden Problem Solver, Rodale Press
- Idaho Garden Calendar: Month-by-Month Guide [www.ifcga.org](http://www.ifcga.org)