

# 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)

**Organic Gardening** [www.organicgardening.com/learn-and-grow](http://www.organicgardening.com/learn-and-grow)  
**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)