

What is Organic Gardening?

The soaring cost of many basic food items, coupled with a general downturn in the economy, is enough to make the idea of growing your own food look appealing. For some, it can become a real necessity. For others, homegrown vegetables simply taste better.

At the same time, there are simple lessons to be learned before you can become a successful gardener. They are not complicated, for the most part, and can be mastered with a little care and attention. These lessons are the focus of this series.

For many years there has been considerable discussion, even among those claiming to be organic gardeners, as to exactly what constitutes organic gardening. In general, organic gardening differs from traditional gardening in two important ways: use of agricultural chemicals and use of artificial or processed fertilizers.

Organic gardening rejects the use of all artificial agricultural chemicals, including pesticides used to control insects, diseases and weeds. Organic gardeners differ concerning which, if any, naturally derived pesticides are permissible and when and how they may be used.

Most organic gardeners consider soils to be a living system and reject artificial chemical fertilizers as harmful to the soil and the environment. Organic gardeners emphasize building soil organic matter and then rely on natural sources of supplemental nutrients. Many people garden organically because of concern over pesticide residues on food.

Organic gardeners are usually willing to tolerate some damage that traditional agriculture perceives as reducing quality to the product. Organic gardeners generally feel occasional insect or disease injury or reduced color and shelf stability is worth the environmental benefits of growing vegetables organically.

There is little doubt that organic gardening improves soils because of the emphasis on increasing soil organic matter. Increased soil organic matter improves soil tilth and structure, improves water retention and evens out nutrient release.

Insect and disease control can be an issue. Some pest problems are easily controlled by organic alternatives. Others are controlled only with difficulty or have no reliable organic controls. Some crops must be avoided by organic gardeners or these gardeners must be willing to risk significant losses from pests.

Careful timing of plantings is an excellent way to reduce the severity of some problems. Cutworms for example, tend to be more severe early in the spring, but decline as temperatures increase and rainfall decreases.

Several types of barriers can be used to prevent cutworms from reaching a plant or plants. Small paper or plastic cups with the bottoms removed, for example, can be pushed into the ground around young transplants to protect them from cutworms. Aluminum foil wrapped around young plants will serve the same purpose.

Exploring what nature is doing to your garden each day is the best way to prevent small problems from turning into big problems.

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