



8 Organic Tips for Better Gardening

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Note to all gardeners: Organic is not the same thing as certified organic. Organic simply means the item contains carbon. A lump of coal, an animal dropping or a blade of grass is organic whether or not they are good for the garden.

For the purpose of growing clean food in the home garden start with the suggestions listed here. They are good for you and good for your garden. Always think of the environment as a connected series of dots, not as a million isolated events. If you think you can simply use an organic spray to replace a manufactured spray you are missing the point of growing clean food the organic way.

(PS For the purpose of getting certified as an organic producer, the process is much more rigorous and I might add expensive!)

1. Physical protection for tender leaves & tasty roots: Netting has role to play in the garden. The fine mesh called Proteknet keeps out tiny insects, like flea beetles on Bok choy, or carrot rust flies on carrots and acts as a wind barrier when plants are small. Tiny insects find your seedlings delectable to eat or desirable

for egg laying. **Grownnet is a coarser poly product for larger insects like cabbage moths.** It also protects new seedlings from wind damage. Spunbound polyester (aka floating row cover) comes in various thicknesses and excludes bugs while it keeps frost and wind at bay. Depending on the thickness it may cause crops to overheat in the summer. Coarser netting including chicken wire and plastic deer fencing keeps out larger animals like birds, bunnies and deer. **Knitted shade cloth is lightweight and reduces heat on your crop.** This keeps lettuce sweet and prevents cool crops from bolting in summer. Is it worth purchasing a product rather than using your old bed sheets? Yes! Sheets will get heavy with moisture, may rip and may break or otherwise damage tender young plants. Sheets will also be expensive for large gardens, will block sun, and may need to be put on and off which means they won't really keep all the bugs out of your covered sanctuary. Proteknet, spunbound polyester, knitted shade cloth, grownnet and coarse screening each have different uses for plant protection but their basic success comes from placing a mechanical barrier between pest or climate and plant. **Bend #9** wire, irrigation piping or galvanized electrical conduit over top of rows to keep the material used from touching plants.

2. Consider getting a mineral analysis of your soil. By sending off a soil sample to be analyzed by a lab you'll know exactly what your garden needs. Tight soils may be the result of too much magnesium and may be caused accidentally if you added dolomitic lime (Calcium Magnesium Carbonate) or Epsom salts (Magnesium sulphate.) Powdery mildew may be the result of an imbalance of zinc and phosphorus. The same source of zinc used by people when they feel a cold coming on (Zinc Sulphate) is the source of zinc for use on plants. Simply mix a tablespoon (yes you can order it at your drug store in bulk instead of pill form) in a gallon of water and spray the mixture on plants at first sign of leaf edge browning or curling under in squash. It is always easier to add what you need than to take out what you have too much of (in fact this is likely impossible),

so get that soil tested or learn to read plant deficiency symptoms! Mineralized soils rarely have pest problems. Keep improving your soils until you no longer have to use row covers for insect protection.

3. Don't like weeding? Find a local, organic source of mulch to help with that. Dried lawn clippings, fallen leaves and wood mulches are all possibilities. Wood mulch might best be used in between raised beds for pathways, or put around woody plants or fruits like raspberries or cherries. Do not pile the mulch up against tree trunks or woody stems because it has been shown to rot bark. In vegetable gardens, consider leaves, straw or grass clippings as pathways or in and around each sprouting veggie. Not only are these easily available, but they also decompose quickly and provide a natural weed barrier that feeds your soil's microbes. **Note:** Cocoa shell mulch available in some regions may be harmful to dogs. Where you need extra help, long handled tools like the CobraHead, Triangle or Trapezoid Hoes allow slicing off of weed roots with minimal soil disturbance or bending. Weeds are often a sign or symptom of soil deficiencies over imbalances. See point 2.

4. Boost your soil biology by making your own compost. Don't rely on store bought compost for garden nutrients and biology. If the product has been packaged it has probably been sterilized. Any of the life that would have benefitted your soil has likely been killed in sterilized or pasteurized compost. Always purchase a bulk product if you want to boost soil biology. Even better? Make your own! Start a vermiculture (composting with worms) bin in your kitchen or basement, or turn your pile of organic scraps (both dry and wet parts) into compost. Even a pile of leaves saved from fall clean up will mulch by spring if you run a mower over it before you pile it in fall. Not only will you get the beneficial biology from bulk or homemade compost, but you will also be adding valuable

organic nutrients back into the soil.

PS If you have never tried making hot compost, give it a try. It is almost instantaneous compared to other composting systems.

5. What about those darn slugs? We don't normally suggest spraying insects, but then again slugs are water-loving molluscs, more closely related to octopus than lady beetles. When you spray anything, even a homemade or organic spray, you are killing something in the ecosystem that exists with reason. For example, if you spray and kill the aphids that linger on your cherry shrub, you are going to starve the local ladybug population. That being said, if you are still building your garden soil and find it stays too wet too long, you may have a problem with slugs. If you need a quicker solution to getting rid of slugs consider spraying household ammonia (Yes it is sold as a common household cleaning solution at grocery stores and is a combination of nitrogen and hydrogen -- NH₄).

Mix a 7:1 part solution of water to ammonia and spray it on plants and soil in the evening or very early morning when slugs are on damp plants and soil but flying insects are waiting for the sun and warmth before they emerge. This will add some needed nitrogen to your soil and deal with the slug problem all at once! (Read further about a household solution for ants around buildings on the **donnabalzer.com blog.**)

6. Encourage Pollinators. Honey Bees are loved and adored by everyone for their sweet sugary spit or – as we call it – honey. But in North America honey bees are actually introduced and are feral insects. This means they were never native here but have gone wild in parts of the country. If you really want to support the natural ecology in your garden or despite your garden, grow a range of flowering plants, especially herbs. Diversity is king and if you can grow a cilantro plant or poppy or big daisy and attract a bumble bee then you have helped build up populations of local insects and that in itself builds and supports our

environment. **Support pollinating bees, bats, moths and birds. We love you all and are managing our gardens to respect and encourage, rather than kill you.**

7. Use cover crops. Cover crops such as fall rye, peas, buckwheat and barley provide many benefits: they prevent erosion by rooting into the soil so it will not wash or blow away. They shade your otherwise unused beds so there is less evaporation, and they feed the microbes when the garden is otherwise unproductive! Did you know that through photosynthesis plants can offer up sugars to soil microbes below? In return, the microbes exchange minerals for the sugar. This symbiotic relationship means more nutrition for your plants (now and in the future) with fewer inputs needed from you.

Different cover crops are thought to encourage different microbes and commercial organic farmers orchestrate long-term rotations. One farmer we met used a perennial cover crop of alfalfa for four to ten years between each and every carrot crop so he could grow healthy organic, pest-free carrots.

8. Lawns, and other mono crops, are not sustainable. The reason it is tough (impossible?) to grow an organic lawn that looks as beautiful as the chemically treated ones is because it is a monoculture crop. It consists of only 1 species of plant: usually just Kentucky Blue Grass.

Combine all of the other points in this document to understand that an organic garden is not just about **"not spraying"**. Instead, it is about encouraging diversity so that all critters can thrive and benefit your garden and plants. The more the other critters do, the less you'll have to do, so it benefits you too. The key to organic gardening? **Grow a variety of plants to keep the whole system thriving!**

