

March 2007 Feature

Organic Gardening: What You Should Know before You Grow!

by Elizabeth H. Florio-Casey

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Spring is almost here. And, in the West, there is no better time than the month of March to get out into the yard and start an organic garden. Getting an early start on your garden provides your new plants with well-needed spring rains and gives you plenty of reasons to hang around outdoors while the weather is still cool enough in which to work and relax.

Why grow organic? Organic gardening is a process of working with nature, not against it. Principally, organic gardeners use natural methods for encouraging plant growth and controlling pests versus using pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Pesticides are responsible for killing both detrimental and helpful insects, plus birds, frogs, and many other small animals that are vital to our ecosystem. Pesticides also disrupt the soil pH and leech into our ground water. Organic produce tastes better than its non-organic counterparts, and, organic gardening honors natural plant cycles that correspond to the regions in which the plants are grown. Lastly, growing organic is an earth-connected, spiritual, and socially responsible practice that can be very rewarding.

You can cultivate several kinds of organic gardens—edible, non-edible, or a combination of both. Edible gardens obviously contain delicious things for us to eat. Non-edible gardens are wonderful because they feature a variety of plants—both flowering and non-flowering—that beautify a yard, encourage relaxation, and invite a deeper connection with nature.

Contrary to what many people think, organic gardens don't have to be large or in full sun. A wide variety of plants and vegetables grow in small areas that receive only partial sun. For example, you can produce 10-12 heads of butter lettuce in two rows measuring a mere five feet long by two feet wide. And, lettuce will tolerate some shade.

You can also consider growing an organic container garden. Kristen Guzman of Growing Eden in Anaheim, California, says: "A full third of my business is containerized gardening, where I assist clients in cultivating beautiful, organic potted plants in compact areas, such as patios, terraces, and small courtyards. Many people in urban areas choose container gardening, because it's a fast, easy, and enjoyable way to bring natural beauty to their spaces."

Whichever type of organic garden you choose, have fun and use the following tips to cultivate a garden you'll love to spend your spring and summer in.

- Pick a sheltered spot to plant. Edible gardens, in particular, do best if they are located in a relatively sheltered location like a yard encased by fencing, out buildings, trees or other types of foliage. Unsheltered gardens pose too many challenges for young plants to contend with, such as wind, pests, and frost.
- Build your soil. Healthy soil—soil that's well aerated, full of organic matter and beneficial critters, such as earthworms and microorganisms—is an organic gardener's best defense against plant disease, pest infestation, and weed control. Healthy soil ensures nutrient dispersal, proper water drainage or retention, and aeration of the plants' roots. Composted kitchen scraps do wonders for making the soil healthy. However, if you don't have compost readily available, you can use various types of organic soil amend available at most plant nurseries.
- Test your soil pH. This is an important consideration in determining and maintaining soil health. Soil can be acid, alkaline, or neutral. Soil pH is determined by testing the mineral levels in the subsoil. If you are growing vegetables, for example, most need an alkaline or lower acid soil. But flowering plants, such a gardenia, azalea, or hibiscus, require a higher acid level. Consider getting your soil pH tested so you can balance the acidity for the types of plants you intend to grow. Your local nursery can explain the steps and likely conduct the test for you.
- Collect rain water and use a drip irrigation system. Water conservation, especially in the West, is a part of life and ideally forms an important role in any gardening plan. Collecting rain water for use in the dry months and installing drip irrigation systems before you plant your garden are two excellent methods for conserving water and saving money.
- Collecting rain water. Rain collection is an ancient practice. Setting up rain collection barrels is a relatively easy process that involves securing containers below the down spouts from your rain gutters and attaching a hose to the system with which to water. The barrels are outfitted with special screens to keep rodents, leaves, kids, and pets out of the water. A great resource for rain collection barrels is the Rain Barrel Guide Web site at www.rainbarrelguide.com.



- Installing a drip irrigation system. Drip irrigation is a highly efficient way to water your yard without waste, because it places water at ground level near the base and roots of your plants. The water is administered slowly so it soaks directly into the soil before evaporating or escaping. Installing a drip irrigation system requires some forethought and several adapters for your water line. Your local nursery can provide help. In addition, the Web lists many resources to help you establish the best system for your garden. For example, check out Jess Stryker's drip irrigation tutorial at www.irrigationtutorials.com/drippguide.htm.
- Use native plants. The Sunset Western Garden book is an invaluable resource for tips on growing native and non-native plants. In high fire areas, native plants often contain higher water content and are a good means of slowing a fire, should one start. Also, the immune systems of native plants are ideally suited to your area's weather and particular pest populations. Aligning your planting with your geography means you'll be working with nature, and you'll grow healthier, easier to maintain plants.

- Use natural pest control. Pests pose a problem for all organic gardens, but the following are a few natural pest control methods that don't endanger the environment.

- Controlling slugs and snails. Try controlling slug and snail damage with a line of sawdust spread along your flowerbeds in a one-to-two inch wide swath. Be sure to do this in front of the beds and behind them, if you can. Slugs and snails don't like crawling across sawdust because it scratches. Another effective slug and snail control method is to place small pieces of cardboard among the plants throughout your yard. Slugs and snails love to eat paper and many will go to the cardboard first where you can easily relocate them away from your plants. Finally, another natural method of controlling snails and slugs is to place specially made copper collars or flat copper tape around the base of your plants or along the lips of your potted plants. Snails don't like the positive charge coming from the copper and are instantly repelled. The following Web site is a good source for copper tape:
www.planetnatural.com/site/snail-slug-copper-tape.

- Controlling insects. To control insects, try using non persistent soap sprays that contain fatty acids or dormant sprays made from various plant extracts such as botanical oils, lime, and sulfur. These sprays naturally repel insects without damaging plants or posing a threat to the environment. Apply the spray mixture to the leaves of your plants with a spray bottle that attaches to your hose. Alternately, you can pick pests off of your plants by hand, but be sure to do this in the early morning when pests are most active. If you are unsure of which plants to grow, your local nursery is a great place to receive tips and information. Most nurseries have literally thousands of plants to make your yard a paradise, but the following non-edible species are easy to cultivate, require little or no maintenance, and bring lots of birds, bees, or butterflies to your yard.

Three easy-to-grow, full sun plants

- Angel Trumpet (scientific name is Brugmansia): Nothing beats the lush, tropical, towering beauty and deeply intoxicating fragrance of the angel trumpet. These vigorous growers have large almond-shaped leaves and huge pendulous, trumpet-shaped flowers that literally cover the entire shrub for months at a time.

The blossom colors range from pale pink to rose, mauve, coral, yellow, chartreuse green, and white. Angel trumpet likes sun, can tolerate some shade, but they do not survive frost so a protected area is ideal. And, note that all parts of this plant are poisonous if ingested.

- Butterfly Bush (scientific name is Buddleia Davidii): This is an incredibly beautiful flowering shrub that's aptly named because it attracts hordes of butterflies to your yard, which feed off the nectar from large spike-shaped flower clusters. The flowers can be purple, pink, white, or red. Butterfly bush is drought tolerant, but with regular water, it will treat you to vigorous summer flowering. The plants like full sun, well-drained soil, and pruning to ground level in late winter.

- Lantana (scientific name is Lantana Camara): This sun loving plant is perfect for erosion control on hillsides and looks great against fencing or along walkways. Butterflies, in particular, love this plant. Lantana tolerates some shade but not harsh, freezing winters so give it a sheltered spot that receives at least four hours of direct sun daily. The flowers are small but clustered into beautiful globes that often contain three different, but complimentary colors. The plant has hairy, leathery leaves and stems that emit a pungent, spicy scent when bruised. Lantana is available in beautiful varieties that include blooms of purple, blue, orange, yellow, red, white, pink, and lilac.



Three easy-to-grow, shade-tolerant plants

- Flowering Maple or Chinese Lantern (scientific name is Abutilon): The flowering maple is a handsome addition to any yard with its large maple-shaped leaves and numerous saucer-like

flowers. Flower colors range from red, apricot, yellow, white, purple, orange, and pink. Many two-color species are also available.

These evergreen shrubs grow as high as 10 feet tall in sheltered locations, so be sure to give them a large area, such as a garden wall or fence, in which to reach their potential. Of course, if you don't want your abutilon to become that tall, regular pruning will keep it in check or you can container garden it to control its size.



- Fox Glove (scientific name is *Digitalis*): The fox glove is an amazing plant with gorgeous flower spikes that grow three to six feet tall above clumps of large, attractive leaves. The flowers are tubular shaped and range in color from white, cream, pink, yellow, and fuchsia.

All have spotted throats. In the right conditions, your fox glove will self-propagate through ingenious seed pods that form after flowering and then crack open, dispersing their contents in the wind or by someone (or something) brushing past their spent spikes.

- Impatiens (scientific name is *Impatiens Wallerana*): These wonderful flowering plants require almost complete shade in order to thrive, but they can tolerate some sun. They grow to 24

inches so are perfect for lining flowerbeds or planting at the base of trees and shrubs. Because impatiens stems are full of water and fairly fragile, they do not thrive in high traffic areas or where animals and kids romp. But they create such a profusion of blooms and are so easy to grow that they more than make up for their fragility. Impatiens are annuals, which means that they have a life cycle of about a year and then die off in cold weather. The flowers are solid white, red, coral, lilac, or pink.



Starting an organic garden in early spring gives us plenty of cool weather in which to work and is a wonderful way to connect with the natural world. Whether we grow edible or non-edible plants in a yard or in containers, using organic methods of cultivation keeps us in alignment with our ecosystem, ensures that our soil, air, and water remain healthy and viable, and gives us a socially-responsible, spiritual practice that nurtures the soul and the earth.

More information on organic gardening can be found on the Internet, numerous books, or your local nursery. Elizabeth H. Florio-Casey is a freelance writer who can be reached at liz@butterfatdp.com.