



organic gardening



what is it?

It's getting down and dirty to produce your own fruit and veg (organic of course, which means no chemical fertilizers or pesticides – you don't want to poison your garden, wildlife or your family).

What you get is fruit & veg in season all year round (more in the summer of course), fresh, organic, and straight from the garden – once you've done it you'll realise the difference in taste. Food grown using chemical fertilizers really doesn't taste the same, because chemical fertilizers are water soluble, and so are taken up by the plants as they drink, whether they need them or not; they grow faster than they would naturally, and become large and watery. Finished compost, or well-rotted manure (well-rotted is a phrase you hear a lot, but it's important) is not water soluble, and plants can take as much of it as they need.

As for pesticides, let's take slugs as an example: slug pellets or other pesticides will certainly kill them, but not all of them, as there are so many. The poison will become concentrated in the birds that eat slugs, however, and could seriously reduce their population, resulting in an epidemic of slugs, with nothing to eat them. You'd then need more pesticides, and you'd end up in a toxic downward spiral, which probably isn't a good idea in your back garden.

You can try to produce all your food from a half-acre plot, or grow a few herbs in a window box. If you live in a tower block, with not even a window box, you could rent an allotment (contact your local authority). It's a fantastic hobby that will keep you fit, provide you with fabulous food, and enhance the environment.



protection for young brassicas: fleeces keep cabbage white butterflies and pigeons off young cabbages, and CDs and tape keep birds from eating other brassicas (not as effective as fleeces).



seed trays: young plants growing in seed trays in the greenhouse in the early spring. Soon they will be 'pricked out' into individual pots, then later hardened off and planted out into the garden.

what are the benefits?

No pesticides, which harm soil micro-organisms, wildlife, and of course, humans.

No chemical fertilizers either, whose water solubility means that when it rains, they are leached from the soil, into ground water or water courses, and cause problems due to excess algal growth starving other organisms of oxygen. The production and distribution of pesticides and chemical fertilizers requires energy, emissions, factories and trucks; who needs them?

Organic gardening uses compost, which builds soil structure, and stops leaching of nutrients and soil erosion; the compost heap takes your kitchen and garden waste, instead of it having to be transported to landfill.

It also encourages earthworms, which aerate the soil, and break down organic matter to produce rich humus – chemical fertilizers and pesticides kill worms.

Food that you grow yourself has no packaging and doesn't have to be transported on trucks to supermarkets.

what can I do?

Don't read too much before you give it a go, as there is so much information out there (some of it conflicting) that it can be a bit bewildering. Start with something easy – onions, potatoes, or beans, and just do it, while gradually reading more to increase your knowledge, and then grow more new things each year. Ask other gardeners – they'll probably be only too happy to share their experience. Decide what you want to grow – what



you like to eat, in other words; start a compost heap (from kitchen and garden waste); and get some garden tools (car boot sales are an excellent source). If you don't have a plot that's been cultivated already, there will be some initial hard work as you dig out all the weed roots – but it will be easier from then on, especially if you mulch (cover the plot in something to hold moisture and suppress weeds – straw is probably the cheapest and easiest mulch material). You can get a pH testing kit from a garden centre to test your soil. Most plants like a neutral to slightly acidic soil, but a well-composted, poison-free soil will balance its own pH, so don't worry too much.

Plan your garden. Grow four beds – of potatoes, root crops, greens, and beans / peas, and rotate each year. This is an important principle of organic growing; different crops take different nutrients from the soil, and are attacked by different pests, so a new crop each year means that nutrients aren't exhausted and pests can't become established. Some plants stay in the same place for a few seasons (strawberries), or for good (rhubarb, fruit trees and bushes).

Buy organic seeds (see below), and do what it says on the packet. Sow brassicas (cabbages, Brussels sprouts and other greens), beans and lettuce in seed trays (around March, indoors or in the greenhouse), in compost from the garden centre (as it won't contain weed seeds) – make sure it's peat-free; later, prick out into individual

pots (now you can use your own compost); then plant out in May. Other crops can be planted straight outside.

There are lots of different jobs to do at different times of the year, and for different plants – books will give more details, as well as exactly how to grow different fruit & veg - when to sow, plant out, harvest etc, and what protection they need. Beans need poles to climb, young brassicas need fleeces to protect them from birds and cabbage white butterflies, and so on.

You can control pests in various ways: rotation; companion planting (onions with carrots, and flowers between the veg – examples of good insect repellents are marigolds and nasturtiums); spray soapy water to repel aphids, and salty water for cabbage white caterpillars. An organic garden will have healthy soil and disease-resistant plants, with predators to eat pests - ladybirds, hoverflies, centipedes, and of course birds (cats are bad news); you could install a pond for frogs.

Watering is best done in the evening, so the sun doesn't dry it out; it's a good idea to install a rainwater butt. You can grow tomatoes, basil, cucumbers, aubergines and peppers in a greenhouse.

resources

- Permaculture Association: world-changing philosophy whose starting point is producing our own food – courses, literature, membership permaculture.org.uk - 0845 458 1805
- HDRA - hdra.org.uk - 0845 130 1304 - organic seeds - ring for catalogue, or order online (click on catalogue at bottom of homepage) – also books (beginners guides, organic pest control, composting); membership organisation – members get free advice
- organicgarden.org.uk – very useful factsheets – including a section for those just starting out
- Geoff Hamilton, 1987, *The Organic Gardening Book*, Dorling Kindersley – very down-to-earth guide
- Lawrence D Hills (founder of HDRA), 1977, *Organic Gardening*, Penguin
- the above books and more are available from LILI, plus gardening courses



companion planting: the smell of onions hides the smell of carrots from carrot root fly.

Contact us or visit our website to find out more about our message, networks, factsheets, books, courses, products, services, magazines, links, forum, events and volunteering on organic farms. You can also become a Friend of LILI, receive our e-newsletter, and help us change the world.

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