



Advice Sheet

Going Organic

What is Organic Gardening?

Organic gardening has much in common with wildlife gardening. Organic gardeners do not use chemical pesticides and fertilizers; instead they try to work with nature, not against her. They aim for a healthy, fertile soil and encourage a complex natural ecosystem where predators help keep pest species under control. The organic approach aims to minimise the impact on the wider environment, by recycling as much as possible and avoiding the use of materials from non-renewable resources, reducing inputs and outputs. The result is an attractive, healthy and productive garden. Most organic gardeners claim their vegetables are tastier than those grown using chemicals!

Books and websites on organic gardening hold lots of useful advice for the wildlife gardener.

Ways to go Organic

Going organic can seem a little overwhelming if you are used to conventional gardening. Even if you are not brave enough to go the whole way, if you follow some of these guidelines your garden will become healthier for you, your family, and for wildlife.

Improving the soil

Soil is wonderful stuff! A rich soil is a highly complex mixture of rock particles, fragments of decaying organic material, and tiny living organisms. Healthy soil is full of bacteria, fungi, microscopic worms and other life forms. These all help recycle nutrients and so encourage the plants to grow. The organic materials provide food for the micro-organisms, help retain water and nutrients, and give the soil structure.

Organic gardeners believe in feeding the soil, not the plant. They aim to build up a healthy, fertile soil, full of organic material, which will in turn support strong, healthy, disease-resistant plants. The way to do this is to add plenty of bulky organic material to the soil at regular intervals. Perhaps the best material is home-made compost – easily made by recycling your garden wastes. Other sources of organic matter are well-rotted animal manures, leaf mould, composted bark and spent mushroom compost. These bulky materials also help the soil retain moisture, so less watering is required during dry spells.

Sometimes additional nutrients are required, particularly in the vegetable plot, with the heavy demands of fast growing crops. Organic gardeners use natural fertilizers such as bone meal, dried seaweed and pelleted chicken manure. These break down slowly in the soil, making their nutrients available to plants over a much longer period than chemical fertilizers. They also fertilize the whole soil micro-organism community.

Make your own compost

In nature, dead plant material is broken down by a range of micro-organisms, until the basic components are once again available to the roots of growing plants to be recycled into plant tissues again. This natural process takes place in a compost heap, recycling garden and kitchen wastes into a dark, soil-like material, full of plant nutrients and with many uses around the garden. Well made compost is pleasant to smell and handle, rich, dark, and crumbly. Even if your home-made compost does not reach this ideal it can still be a valuable soil conditioner and source of nutrients.



Compost bin



When compost is dug into the soil it encourages microscopic soil life, making the soil healthier and increasing nutrient availability to plants. It also improves the structure of the soil, helping to break up clay soils and making sandy soils more moisture retentive.

Compost can also be laid on the surface as a weed suppressing mulch. Worms and other soil organisms and leaching will gradually move the nutrients down into the soil, so this is a good way to feed permanent plantings such as fruit bushes, shrubs, trees and perennials.

Choose the right seeds and plants

Sun-loving lavender will not flower well in the shade, while hostas and primulas which like cool damp shade will not do well in a sun-baked south facing border.

If you grow plants which suit your soil and garden microclimate they are much more likely to thrive, and strong healthy plants are much better able to withstand attack by pests and diseases. So it makes sense to find out what your soil is like, and observe which parts of the garden are sunniest, which have shade, where is most exposed to prevailing winds etc., then place your plants accordingly.

Pests and diseases can be a particular problem for the vegetable grower, but there are now varieties of many vegetables that are resistant to common problems. For example, there are potato varieties resistant to blight, eelworm, scab and other problems.

Weed control without Herbicides

Regular hoeing will prevent weed seedlings becoming established, although long-rooted perennial weeds such as docks and dandelions need digging out.

Never leave bare soil exposed, it is an open invitation for weeds to colonise. In the ornamental garden dense ground cover plants, such as bugle, berginia or periwinkle, will swamp out most weeds. A thick mulch will prevent annual weeds coming up, and organic mulchs such as chipped bark or compost will gradually break down, enriching the soil as they do so. Inorganic mulches include plastic membranes and gravel.

In the vegetable patch ground is often left bare over winter. As well as allowing weeds to colonise valuable nutrients will be leached out by the winter rain. Instead sow a green manure in the autumn, such as alfalfa, agricultural mustard or clover. These will smother any weeds and hold onto any nutrients. Long-rooted species will bring up nutrients from deep underground. In the spring green manures can be dug in, or are a valuable addition to the compost heap. If ground is left bare in the summer for short periods between crops it can be covered by plastic sheeting, sheets of cardboard or old carpets to prevent weed seeds germinating.

Encourage Useful Predators

Aphids (greenfly), slugs and snails are probably the most annoying garden pests. The good news is that although you may not find them very appetising they are top on the menu for a wide range of predators. Song thrushes are adept at smashing snail shells, hedgehogs, toads and ground beetles will all gobble up slugs; and aphids are consumed in huge numbers by ladybirds and hoverfly larvae, lacewings and blue tits. Other useful garden predators are millipedes, earwigs, frogs, bats and most small birds. By welcoming these animals into your garden you can save your plants from excessive damage.



Ladybirds are known as aphid predators, although it is their larvae that are most voracious



Easy ways to get the predators on your side

Build a pond, to encourage frogs and toads into the garden. Toads will also appreciate a cool damp refuge – underneath a water-butt is a favourite.

Plant insect attracting flowers, especially around the vegetable patch. Hoverflies are attracted to yellow flowers, and seem to particularly like the poached egg plant. Dwarf marigolds are also good insect attractants and planted in the greenhouse may reduce whitefly infestations.

In the ornamental borders a thick mulch of bark chippings, leaf mould or compost gives shelter to ground beetles, rove beetles, millipedes and even toads, all active slug predators.

Provide hibernation sites for ladybirds, lacewings and other beneficial insects. Special hibernation homes can be bought or built, or just leave piles of twigs and dry flower stalks around. Dense climbing plants such as ivy also provide many hibernation sites.

Feed the birds. Small birds generally forage in flocks, and the flock will wait in nearby trees or shrubs for individuals to take turns at the feeder. While waiting they will pick up any aphids or caterpillars around.

Tolerate a low level of pest damage. Natural predators will not eliminate every single pest from your garden, and a few aphids and slugs are needed to keep predator populations going. In general strong healthy plants will not suffer from a few greenfly or slugs. Plants which are particularly vulnerable may need some additional protection.

Avoid using Chemicals

Organic gardeners do not use chemical pesticides, herbicides or fertiliser.

Many pesticides are indiscriminate killers, poisoning beneficial insects as well as pest species. Pest populations quickly recover after spraying, and if their predators have been killed off there can soon be more pests than before. Many pests, including aphids, caterpillars and slugs, are important food sources for other invertebrates, birds and mammals.

Pesticides are poisons, and if used carelessly can be toxic to you, your children or your pets. We know very little about the long term effects of garden chemicals on us and our environment. It has been shown that residues from some pesticides remain in sprayed vegetable crops – they form part of the vegetable tissue, so cannot simply be washed off – would you want to eat these?

Chemical fertilizers can result in a quick boost to plant growth, but are quickly washed out of the soil and can end up polluting watercourses. They do nothing to improve the soil and are more likely to disrupt the delicate balance of micro-organisms which provide natural fertility.

Chemical herbicides are also problematical. It is very easy to kill valuable cultivated plants when applying herbicides. Some persistent weeds are very strong and need several applications of herbicide. It is not known what effects many herbicides can have on animals or people, but it is unlikely to be beneficial.

Manage Pests and Diseases

As well as encouraging predators organic gardeners use many cunning strategies to control pests and diseases, such as

- Using a fine mesh barrier to protect crops from flying pests such as large white butterflies, the carrot root fly and pigeons.
- Using rings cut from old drinks bottles to protect delicate seedlings from slugs.
- Releasing a parasitic wasp to control whitefly in the greenhouse

For more information contact Cheshire Wildlife Trust, Bickley hall Farm, Bickley, Malpas, SY14 8EF
Phone 01948 820728
Or visit our web site www.wildlifetrust.org.uk/cheshire