Organic Gardening

"Organic gardeners should be very careful about which pesticides they use, even when using natural pesticides, so as to protect beneficial insects."

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Organic gardening... what exactly does that mean? I am often asked that question and it's really a very simple concept of growing and farming using natural methods. The term organic gardening was coined in the 1940’s by J. I. Rodale in his publication ‘Organic Gardening and Farming.’ It refers to growing plants in an environment free of synthetic or manufactured fertilizers and pesticides. For certified growers selling organic produce to the public this also can mean not using irradiation, sewage sludge, or genetically modified organisms in production. They follow standards set by USDA’s National Organics Program regulations.

For the backyard gardener and homeowner, organic gardening is simply foregoing synthetic pesticides and fertilizers by using alternative pest control materials and natural fertilizers instead.

Organic gardening applies not only to food production but also to lawns and landscapes as well. A lawn that is freshly sprayed with pesticides is no place for children and pets. Also, if not applied correctly, pesticides we apply in our yard can run off our yards in storm-water or leach through the soil into groundwater. This can affect our drinking water or our natural water bodies such as springs, lakes, and rivers.
Some folks wonder why they have few butterflies or bees, yet they or their neighbors are constantly spraying insecticides. Even mosquito sprays can affect your butterfly garden. Overuse of pesticides disrupts the natural cycles of the ecosystem in your yard and will cause more damage than good. Many insecticides kill beneficial insects as well as they kill the pest insects.

The basics of organic gardening start with the soil through incorporating ample organic matter. Use homemade compost or composted manure from a local source. Start your own compost pile with your kitchen scraps, leaves, and yard waste.

The addition of organic matter will improve the structure of your soil, often improving both its water-holding capacity and drainage. Organic matter also adds plant nutrients to the soil. It’s a good idea to start with a soil test to determine which nutrients are deficient in your soil and what the pH (acidity level) of your soil is. Go to your UF-IFAS Leon County Extension Office at 615 Paul Russell Road to obtain the mailing materials for sending a soil sample for analysis to the University of Florida.

Nutrients need to be replenished regularly in the soil, and recycling materials through composting is an inexpensive way to make your own soil amendments. Other natural materials such as earthworm castings aid in promoting a healthy soil. There are also many good commercial organic fertilizers on the market today at local nurseries.

It is important to monitor your garden and yard regularly to spot pest problems early. Take a walk around the yard every few days and check out your vegetable patch daily. The best pest control is finding the critters early and manually removing them. If you are too squeamish for that, there are options available at local nurseries for less toxic control.

Some helpful resources in organic gardening are 'Weedless Gardening' by Lee Reich and 'Organic Manual' by J. Howard Garrett. The UF-IFAS Extension website has an organic vegetable gardening guide at [http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/VH019/](http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/VH019/)

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