



GroundEd

THE INITIATIVE COLLECTION:
Organic Gardening -Tips



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Introduction

Over 20 million people in North America will be growing their own food this year. Organic gardening has been growing in popularity for years, and for good reason. The economy has many of us looking for ways to save on our food bill and growing your own produce is one of the easiest ways to do this.

According to the National Gardening Association, the average gardener spends about \$70 on their crops – but grows around \$600 of vegetables!

And we all want to be sure that the food our families are eating is as healthy as possible. An organic garden ensures the safest, healthiest produce for everyone.

You can also try out different varieties of the plants you find in your local store. Plus, there's an added benefit: store-ripened produce simply can't hold a candle to the taste of home-grown vegetables.

Simply put, organic gardening means growing your plants without using man-made chemicals. These can not only collect on your food and contaminate it but can kill off beneficial insects that will help your garden grow better.

Every year, the Environmental Working Group releases a “Dirty Dozen” list – the top twelve USDA tested produce with the highest pesticide loads. Some of the repeat offenders include celery, spinach, potatoes, peppers, kale, and tomatoes. Just think how much pesticide you’re consuming when you’re not going organic.

Going organic also reduces the risk of food contamination. E. coli, Salmonella, and Listeria are the most common offenders for food borne contamination. There’s no need to worry about these when you grow your own produce.

What could be better than simply stepping outside your door and harvesting your own produce?

Growing your own vegetables is not only healthier and tastier, it's cost-efficient. A hundred pounds of tomatoes from a hundred square feet. Twenty pounds of carrots from 24 square feet. All you need is a little patience and some smart tactics and you, too, can get this sort of yield from your home garden.

Thankfully, a vegetable garden is very easy to start. You don't need as much effort as you might think to keep it growing strong, either. Follow the tips and tricks featured in this special report to have the vegetable garden of your dreams.

Let's begin!

Tip #1: Choose Location Carefully

Choose a location for your garden that gets plenty of sun and is close to your water source (usually your garden hose). Most vegetables need about six hours of sunlight a day.

Fruiting plants, like tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, and pumpkins even like eight to ten hours.

Plant taller crops like corn, tall tomatoes, or pole beans on the north or west side of the garden so they don't shade the other plants.

If you do have shade in parts of your garden, consider planting “cool” plants such as lettuce, peas, spinach, collards, and root veggies (potatoes, carrots, turnips, and beets) there as those plants like a cooler environment and appreciate the shade during the hotter seasons.

Keep your plants out of strong winds that could break their tender stems or keep the beneficial insects away from them. If you need to, install a wind screen or plant your garden in a more protected area.

Avoid areas of high foot traffic, too. Tender plants can easily be broken or killed by kids taking a short cut through the garden.

Look for an area that gets enough water without flooding. You want the soil moist but not sodden.

In addition, you'll want to make sure your garden is as level as possible. This will help drainage and make your job easier when it comes to planting and harvesting.

If you'd like to craft raised beds (bottomless frames that raise the soil above the grade line) to make harvesting even easier, create those before you get started. Have everything in place before you even begin your garden.

Tip #2: Test Your Soil

You always want to start with healthy soil. You can get a soil testing kit from your local extension agent. Let them know you're trying organic farming and they'll give you lots of expert tips.

You need to know whether or not your soil is healthy enough before you put the first plant into the ground.

For many of us urban dwellers, the soil has been depleted of nutrients or simply trucked in for construction purposes. A good soil test will also give you expert recommendations on how to fix whatever may be wrong.

Soil pH, for example, is important for helping your plants access the nutrients they need in that soil. The pH tells how acidic or alkaline your soil may be.

The most important soil component is the organic matter, like manure, peat, moss or compost. Your finished soil should be neither sandy nor too compact.

When the mix is right, the soil will bind together when squeezed, but break back apart if disturbed. It will retain enough water without saturating your plants.

Compost is the best option for organic matter because it contains decayed micro-organisms from plants and is naturally healthier for your crops. You can make your own compost heap or buy ready-made compost at the garden store. Be sure to look for organic compost however.

Reduce weed growth by spreading a one- to three-inch layer of mulch on top of your soil. This will also lessen fungal disease spores landing on your plants and will keep the plants cooler in summer and warmer in winter.

Use an organic material like cocoa-hulls, weed-free straw, or even newspaper. These will also add beneficial organic matter to your soil as they decompose. You may or may not need fertilizer, depending on how good your original soil is.

If you feel you need it, look for well-rotted manure from plant eating animals like horses, rabbits, sheep, or chickens. You can also buy organic fertilizer at your garden store.

Be careful though! Too much nitrogen (the first number on the fertilizer package) will give you lush green plants – but fewer veggies to harvest. It's best to get your soil as healthy as possible without resorting to fertilizer.

Tip #3: Use Planters

If you don't have a large yard, you don't have to give up your dreams of vegetable harvesting. Most veggies do quite well in planters, whether it is a smaller window-sill garden or a larger outdoor container.

Invest in the proper planters and follow the directions as if you had a larger garden. You'll be collecting your very own produce in practically no time. You can even build a self-watering container.

Going vertical is a great way to container-garden, as well. Give your vining plants – tomatoes, pole beans, squash, melons, cucumbers, etc. – a trellis or support and watch them grow. They take up far less space this way and are decorative as well.

Harvest time is easier with a vertical garden too, because you can easily see each vegetable. Your vertical plants will pick up fewer

diseases and fungal spores because less of the plant is in contact with the soil. Make sure your containers get plenty of natural light or use a professional “grow bulb” that will give them the needed raw material for growth.

If your plants are outside, consider planting some companions to help them out, like flowers that attract beneficial insects or repel harmful ones.

Tip #4: Grow Based on Your Location

Decide what you want to plant based on your climate, space, tastes, available time, and level of expertise. Newcomers might want to start with some of the easier plants, like carrots, beans, cucumbers, peppers, and lettuce. You won't need to baby these plants or have an expert's knowledge of soil conditions.

Growing conditions and ripening cycles are also going to be different based on the plant, your climate, and the season. Don't plan to start all your plants at the same time.

Check the planting information on seed packets or seedlings, or look it up online on a site like [The Old Farmer's Almanac](#) or [Urban Farmer](#). You're looking for the **Planting Calendar**.

Create your gardening schedule so you can plant and harvest everything according to its natural cycle.

This takes a bit of planning, but it's well worth it in the end when you begin harvesting your own organic foodstuffs!

“Cool season” plants like lettuce, spinach, and root veggies can be planted in Spring. Put in greens, peas, potatoes, carrots, beets, and other cool-weather crops early. But “warm season” veggies like tomatoes and peppers shouldn't be planted until the soil warms up.

The best dates for each crop will vary by location, so check with your nursery or local cooperative extension service.

Be careful how many of each type of plant you have as well. Tomatoes and zucchini are prolific producers and you may be overwhelmed if you have too many of these.

One of the basic problems a beginning gardener faces is overestimating how many plants they need. Start small and only grow what you know you'll be able to eat.

For a family of four, the following tips will give you a good garden with a little left over for canning or trading.

Make your garden ten feet long with eleven rows in it. These rows should run north to south in order to take advantage of sunlight. If this is way too large, simply cut it in half or plant fewer rows.

Make sure you leave a nice pathway in between each row so you can weed and harvest without brushing up against the plants and breaking off leaves and stems.

Be sure to take into account the amount of space each plant needs.

For example, you might plant nine bush beans into a ten squarefoot bed, because they need about four inches between

plants. Or you could plant sixteen onions, since they can be planted three inches apart.

Tip #5: Think Outside the Box

Pay attention to how you arrange your plants to maximize your yield. If space is at a premium, instead of planting in rows or squares, why not try going with a triangle? You can fit ten to fourteen percent more plants in a triangle than in a square.

Just be careful not to space the plants too closely. When one researcher increased the space between romaine lettuce plants from eight to ten inches, the harvest weight per plant doubled.

Weight per yield per square foot is a more valuable indicator than number of plants per square foot. As in so many things, quality of plant yield is better than quantity of plants.

Also, instead of using up valuable garden space for a vining plant, consider going vertical.

Create a trellis, cage, or simple net support for your tomatoes, pole beans, squash, melons, cucumbers, etc. You'll be able to more easily see the fruits on a vertical plant, so harvest time will be easier.

The improved air circulation among the leaves also repels fungal diseases. And don't worry about securing the heavy fruit – even squash and melons will develop thicker stems for support.

Speaking of outside the box, did you know that 45 minutes of gardening burns the same amount of calories as running 1.5 miles in 15 minutes?

Gardening is healthy in more ways than one! It gets you out in the fresh air and sunshine (you need that Vitamin D). Digging, planting, and weeding are good low-impact forms of repetitive

exercise. Regular physical activity not only helps you feel better, it relieves stress, boosts energy, and relieves tension.

You also waste less food when you garden. In the United States, organic waste is the second highest component of landfills. It's the largest source of our methane emissions.

The UN Environmental Program estimates 30 percent of the food supply is wasted. That's around 20 pounds of food per person per month.

If you're gardening, you're less likely to waste the results of your hard labor. You might can or otherwise preserve your crops, or trade it for something different from a neighboring gardener.

Tip #6: Pick Your Crops

Why go to all this trouble, then run down to the local feed and seed store and pick up whatever's on the shelf? A simple internet search can put you in touch with companies that sell organic seeds and seedlings.

Look for the USDA Organic logo. Organic transplants sold in your local gardening center will have tags or labels showing they've been grown under organic conditions.

Contact your local Cooperative Extension Agents for tips on which plants grow best in your particular area.

The Top Ten veggies include tomatoes, zucchini squash, peppers, cabbage, bush beans, lettuce, beets, carrots, chard, and radishes.

Which part of the plant will you eat? It varies by plant.

You'll be eating roots of plants such as carrots, beets, turnips, and radishes; and stems of asparagus and rhubarb. You eat the leaves of lettuce, kale, cabbage, chard, spinach, and most herbs; and the seeds of green beans and peas.

Onions and garlic are the bulbs of those plants, while tomatoes, eggplant, zucchini, and pumpkins are fruit because they contain seeds. One additional tip is to plant marigolds with your veggies. They repel insects.

Choose veggies you and your family will eat, unless you're planning to sell the unwanted plants at a farmer's market. Think of herbs as well – home-grown herbs are far superior to what you'll find in the supermarket.

Also remember summer vacation – if you're going to be gone, find someone who can look after your garden and harvest those tomatoes and zucchini for you.

Most vegetables are annuals – this means you need to plant them every year. However, asparagus, rhubarb, and certain herbs are perennials, coming back year after year. Be sure to give them their own space in your garden and not forget and plow them under.

Also, consider that some crops like radishes and bush beans mature quickly and have a short harvest season. Others like tomatoes have a longer period of time.

Check the seed packet or seedling planting directions for specifics with your plants. This can allow you to replant once the growing season is over for one plant and get another harvest from a different one. Some veggies may even produce more than one crop in a season, such as beans, beets, carrots, cabbage, kohlrabi, lettuces, radishes, rutabagas, spinach, and turnips.

In addition, if you stagger your planting – don't plant all your lettuce at once, for example, but put out a few at a time – you'll get a longer harvest period.

If you're going with seeds, follow directions on the packets to space them out. Good air flow between the plants can help prevent many types of fungal diseases.

You'll also need to find out how often to water and how much water each plant type "likes."

Root veggies like carrots don't transplant well, so they should always be started with seeds. If you're choosing seedlings, extension service experts recommend picking plants with healthy color and no yellowing leaves.

Stay away from wilted plants or droopy leaves. Gently tap the plant out of the pot to check the roots – they should be white and well-developed.

Avoid plants that have already budded or are flowering. You want your new plants to spend their energy creating a solid root system first.

If you must pick a flowering seedling, pinch off the buds and flowers to force the plant to “refocus” on its roots.

Tip #7: Clean Your Garden

You should plan on weeding your garden almost daily. Pulling weeds is much easier after a rain or watering (if the soil is really muddy, wait until it dries a bit).

You can pinch the stem and gently pull the weed out by its roots or use a trowel to pry the roots out of the soil. If you're careful not to damage your vegetables, you can use a hoe, but try to get the roots as well as the tops of the weeds, otherwise they'll just grow back.

At least once a week, walk through your garden picking up any shed foliage. Many diseases spread from dead leaves and stems, and you can often prevent this by snipping off any suspicious looking leaves or flowers.

Throw these leaves into your garbage – not the compost heap – because they could infect your other plants as well.

Garden pests can still affect an organic garden, though they're less likely to if you follow our tips. If you see insect pests, the best way to get rid of them is simply to pick them off. Wear gloves if you need to. Aphids, for example, are easily picked or washed off. They usually attack plants under stress, which can be caused by a lack of water.

Chemical-free barriers work well also. Something as easy as copper barrier tape can repel slugs and snails, and fabric-like row covers protect your plants from birds overhead.

A cardboard collar can protect seedlings from cutworms, which nip the stem off at the soil line. If you live where larger predators such as deer or rabbits may prey on your crops, you may need to invest in a good six- to eight-foot fence, with a wire mesh near the ground.

Spraying pesticides on your garden is generally more harmful than helpful. Not only do the chemicals get into your produce, but they're likely to kill off beneficial insects that help your garden to grow better.

Bees of all sorts help to pollinate your plants so they produce more, and ladybugs or praying mantis hunt and kill harmful insects for you.

If you absolutely must spray, do it in the evening when beneficial insects aren't out as much, and spray only the area needed.

Tip

#8: Call in Reinforcements

For most vegetables, one inch of water per week is enough (this includes any rain you may get). Wet leaves, especially in the afternoon or evening, can help spread the growth of molds and mildews like downy or powdery mildew.

Instead of spraying your plants, invest in a good water-saving soaker hose or drip line that will deliver water directly to the roots without splashing their leaves.

Keep the soil moist throughout the growing season, according to the water needs of each plant. An automatic timer may be a valuable investment for your garden.

Another good plan is to call in the beneficial insects like bees for pollination and ladybugs or praying mantis to kill off harmful pests. You can plant the following flowers around your garden space to attract these helpful bugs: bachelor's button, cleome, cosmos, black-eyed Susan, daisy, marigold, nasturtium, purple coneflower, salvia, sunflower, yarrow and zinnia.

Pick flowers that grow easily in your climate and growing region. Not only will your garden be more fruitful, but your family can also appreciate the colorful display.

Tip

#9: Pairing and Timing

Interplanting compatible crops can save space and result in a better yield.

Think about the classic Native American “three sisters” combination: corn, beans, and squash. The thick cornstalks support the pole beans, while squash shades the ground below, reducing the growth of weeds.

Other compatible combinations include tomato, basil, and onions; leaf lettuce and peas or brassica; carrots, onions, and radishes; and beets and celery.

Succession planting is also a valuable technique. You can grow more than one crop in the same space over a given period of time. Many gardeners get three or even four crops from one area.

For example, start with early-growing lettuce, then try fast-maturing corn and more greens or overwintered garlic. This will give you three crops over a single growing season.

To get the most from this sort of technique, try using transplants instead of seeds. These are already a month or so old when you plant them, so they mature more quickly.

Also, choose fast-maturing varieties of your plants. Whenever you replant, replenish your soil with a ¼ to ½ inch of compost, working it into the top two inches of soil.

Tip

#10: Extend Your Growing Season

Adding a few weeks to each end of your growing season can buy you enough time to grow yet another succession crop (like leaf lettuce, kale or turnips) or to harvest more end-of-the-season tomatoes.

To get these extra weeks, you need to keep the air around your plants warm even if the weather is cool. This requires mulches, cloches (a bell-shaped glass cover that acts like a mini-greenhouse), row covers, or cold frames.

You can give heat-loving plants like melons, peppers, and eggplants an early start by warming the air and the soil.

Start six to eight weeks before the last frost date. Preheat your soil by covering it with infrared-transmitting (IRT) mulch or black plastic to absorb heat. Cover the bed with a slitted, clear plastic tunnel.

When the soil temperature warms to 65 to 70 degrees Fahrenheit, set out plants and cover the black plastic or mulch with straw to keep it from trapping too much heat.

Remove the plastic tunnel when the air warms and all danger of frost has passed. You can install the tunnel again at the end of the season when temperatures cool. However, using straw often attracts slugs. You can prevent this by also planting alliums, which repel the animals. Or just pick them off at night using a flashlight.

Conclusion

With just a little investment, some patience, and a bit of work, you can harvest your own organic vegetables using your yard or containers.

With garden-to-table organic veggies, you can enjoy many benefits. Not only do they taste many times better than what you'll find in the grocery store, but they're healthier as well.

Organic veggies give you higher levels of Vitamin C, antioxidants, iron, and other nutrients. They have lower levels of potentially harmful chemical residues. Your garden-ripened vegetables also don't sit on a store shelf for weeks at a time, losing valuable nutrients.

Gardening increases your food security – defined by the World

Health Association as the state where “all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life.” Gardening gives you direct access to fresh food that can be harvested and fed to your family. And if you learn how to can or otherwise preserve your crop, you can fill your pantry and feed yourselves even when growing season is over.

And gardening just makes you feel better! There’s little more satisfying than planting a seed or seedling, caring for it, and watching it grow and produce food for you and your family. You get plenty of fresh air and exercise, which also makes you feel better. And you feel a sense of pride as you prepare a meal from produce you grew yourself.

Not only will your family benefit from this healthy produce, but your grocery bill will go way down.

You can even set up a trade system with neighboring gardeners so each of you can grow different plants according to their expertise

and space. Trading extra produce will give you some variety and saves even more money. You might even join in a community garden instead of growing on your own land – find a good local garden through the [American Community Gardening Association](#).

If you're looking for a great way to increase your food supply, lower your bills, increase your exercise, and just feel better overall, you can't go wrong with your very own organic vegetable garden.

Resources

Here are links to a few resources that I believe will help you:

Gardening Tips

>> <https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/home/gardening/>

Planting Tips

>> <https://blog.nationwide.com/tips-for-planting-garden/>

Organic Gardening

>> <https://www.pennington.com/all-products/fertilizer/resources/how-to-grow-an-organic-vegetable-garden>

Grow the Perfect Vegetable Garden

>> <https://www.growingagreenerworld.com/tips-for-growing-theperfect-vegetable-garden/>

Community Gardening Association

>> <https://www.communitygarden.org/>



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