

Spring for Organics

A lot is said and written about the initial high monetary cost of organic products. But do you realize that spending less or none on chemical applications in your garden saves you money *and* soil? If you've never gardened organically before, this Spring season may be the perfect time to start.

Whether you have acreage or a tiny plot, gardening is good for the soul. All that's good about gardening is even better when organic. Be kind to your soul, budget *and* the environment. Try growing plants without using chemical pesticides, herbicides or germicides this year. By doing so, you are improving the lives of present and future generations.

Organic eating is broadening into organic lifestyle where education for both begins in the garden. For several years the Garden Writer's Association of America has promoted an initiative to put a garden in every grade school. The Rodale Institute in Pennsylvania hands out awards to schools with outstanding organic gardens. And California's board of education mandated that every elementary school should establish a community garden for instructional purposes.

The first-ever global agreement to control persistent organic pollutants was publicized in 2001. Delegates from 122 nations, including the U.S., agreed to impose worldwide embargoes on twelve chemicals which consist of nine pesticides, PCBs and dioxins. Such action is evidence that the human race has been contaminating soil way too casually.

Farming everywhere was organic until chemical pesticides and chemical fertilizers were introduced after World War II. The quick, chemical fixes became the fashionable bug-free choice of society. Children raised with that perception tend to lack awareness of nature. Conversion to environmental consciousness, however, is possible for anyone.

Prince Charles, resident of the world's gardening haven, received numerous titles through his lifetime. I'll bet you didn't know one of them is *Royal Patron of the Soil Association*. It's a U.K. charity that promotes organic farming. Britain's press announced that the blue-blooded Royal Highness earned his green thumb in 1990 for converting to organic at his High-grove Estate. The Prince, who opposes genetic engineering, says he doesn't think it's right to tamper with the building blocks of life.

There are many good reasons for teaching organic gardening marvels. But to truly understand requires "digging in." Yes indeed, get your hands dirty and watch your appreciation grow for the aspects of nature that money can't buy. Your organic consciousness may even lead you to *vote for your dollars*. You can, for example, help community farmers continue to grow without chemicals by purchasing their organic food, herbs and naturally-crafted goods.

But let's get back to *your* terrain. Unless you are limited to container gardening (sometimes described as patio gardening), you really ought to get your soil tested. Most important if you are going to grow edibles; be it vegetables, herbs or flowers. Testing the soil tells you if chemicals are there from previous applications or spills. Also, the soil diagnosis provides any adjustment needs for good, basic plant growth. With many local

and mail order products, as well as composting, you can adjust your soil organically. Just ask.

And speaking of basics, the next essential step for organic progress is mulching. You read everywhere about the importance of mulch. Healthy plants attract good bugs that work with the cycle of botanical life. Strong plants rarely become infested with the wrong kind of bugs. Mulch for healthy plants, nurture the good bugs, and control weeds at the same time.

Undesirable insects are one of the greatest fears of potential organic gardeners. Beating the bugs may become as challenging as weeding effectively. Some of us gardening novices are guilty of bug war obsession. Just like drugs, you can slide into addiction. Pesticide addiction, that is. With no such rehab in site, watch out! Remember, your mission is to go organic.

If you find it necessary to attack aphids or spider mites, try the water hose first. Reach the water spray to the underside of the leaves and you will control most of those pests. The next weapon is soap spray. Even Japanese beetles don't like soap spray. Be sure to hit the bug directly and it will kill. For an almost-free formula, mix 1 tablespoon of dishwashing detergent with a half gallon of preferably distilled water into a clean spray bottle. There you have some weapons.

Another easy way to manage bugs is by supporting bats in your area. Bats eat vast numbers of insect pests, but like bluebirds and purple martins, their numbers are declining for lack of places to live. Give them a home. You can buy a bat house with luring instructions from most any garden supplier. Or look around to see if nature is providing a warm and moist habitat that bats crave. Maybe a tree hollow, cave or shed.

Some of our bat species have declined due to pesticide poisoning, so the organic route is imperative to take advantage of this no-hassle technique. There are plenty of fears about bats, but they are myths. They don't want to nest in human hair and they rarely bite anyone. Fact is, the more you learn about bug-eating bats, the more you like them. I find spotting their dinner sport at dusk truly entertaining. They're fast eaters!

One of my favorite Spring season chores is to mail order ladybugs and praying mantis. They're a treat to watch and help keep your garden clear of bad bugs. Find ladybug homes along bat house suppliers. Discover helpful tips about keeping these good guys around. Organic gardening is your first clue.

From patio to farm gardening, inspiration from literature and illustrations provide readily available support. With interest steadily growing, advertising for organic lawn maintenance and landscapers will be reaching for your business. It's become a new, trendy market niche for old-time labor.

A fashionable, earth-friendly garden consists of healthy plants and creative homes for your local bugs and critters. The best way to achieve that is to go organic. Support bats, ladybugs, butterflies and birds with a natural habitat to make friends and forget the pesticide war. You'll receive thanks in many unspoken ways.

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