

ORGANIC WEED CONTROL

Chemical weedkillers may seem like an attractive solution if weeds are a problem but they can affect non-target plants, either through the soil or carried on spray drift. They may also destroy beneficial insects and their habitats. Wherever possible, try to avoid weedkillers by hand weeding or hoeing and try to tackle weed problems before they produce and disperse their seeds and heavy infestations develop. In addition, prevention is much better than cure, so carefully prepare sites prior to planting and incorporate weed barriers to reduce the chance of weed infestation.

PREPARATION: When preparing a planting site, ensure all perennial weeds such as couch grass, nettles and brambles are removed by digging out with a fork. Remove annual weeds by hand or in dry weather use a hoe to cut off weeds from their roots.

BARRIERS: Different options are available to gardeners to help smother or prevent weed growth.

Mulching with a 5-8cm layer of organic material such as garden compost, well-rotted farmyard manure, spent mushroom compost or cocoa shell helps smother annual weeds. Alternatively, plastic sheets, old carpet, carpet underlay or other fabricated material can be used to suppress annual and perennial weeds. In ornamental garden situations, ground-cover plants provide a more attractive weed-suppressing alternative. A barrier of heavy-gauge black polythene can be sunk to prevent perennial weeds from growing into an area from an adjoining garden.

ALTERNATIVE METHODS: Paint-on gels are ideal for treating perennial weeds such as bindweed as the weedkiller is absorbed through the leaves and down to the roots, without the worry of spray drift on to other plants. They are also the best way to treat odd nettles or brambles cropping up in a hedge or densely planted border, as you can apply them specifically to a certain area.

ATTRACTING WILDLIFE

Gardens have great potential to act as mini nature reserves, attracting all kinds of beneficial insects that will help reduce pests and diseases and improve pollination. By including diverse combination of plants and avoiding or reducing the use of harmful chemicals, gardens can provide richer habitats for wildlife and biodiversity than many found in nature. For more information see our leaflet *Making Gardens Beneficial for Wildlife* or visit www.rhs.org.uk/advice.



WHAT YOU'LL NEED

For planting:

- Watering can
- Fork & spade
- Hoe
- Organic matter

Plant food:

- Gloves
- Mushroom/home compost
- Wood ash

- Liquid seaweed extract
- Bonemeal
- Hoof and horn
- Fish, blood & bone

- Dried blood
- Garden lime
- Manure
- Liquid organic fertiliser

Weed control:

- Polythene
- Fleece
- Paint-on gels

For more information:
www.rhs.org.uk/advice
www.plantforlife.info

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THE EASY GUIDE TO

GARDENING MORE ORGANICALLY

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Organic

WHAT IS ORGANIC GARDENING?

Gardening organically means growing plants without manufactured fertilisers and other synthetic chemicals for feeding, pest and disease control, soil conditioning or weeding. Although often regarded as an alternative to gardening with chemicals, many organic techniques are simply good practices and compatible with other forms of gardening.

Excluding manufactured chemicals when growing ornamental plants, lawns, fruit and vegetables brings some challenges. Alternative treatments are often more expensive, not so readily available and can be less effective, so reduce yield and quality. In addition, some techniques may not be visually appealing and more effort needs to be given to planning, preparation, vigilant maintenance and understanding wildlife in gardens.

On the plus side, organic gardening is beneficial to the environment, provides a more attractive home to wildlife and, by cultivating fruit and vegetables organically, you'll know your tasty produce is chemical free.

So bearing all this in mind, you may choose to go wholly organic or to combine organic techniques with a reduction in chemicals, using them only as necessary to maintain soil fertility and deal with the most damaging pests, diseases and weeds. Just follow our guide to see what suits.

Pests

PESTS AND DISEASE CONTROL

To reduce pest and disease attacks, first ensure a plants' requirements for steady growth are met (see Good Plant Management, right).

If outbreaks do occur, there are many organic methods and products available for control, and our leaflet on *Pests & Diseases* contains more detailed information. The following tips may also prove useful:

- Biological-control organisms, such as predators and parasites, are available by mail order or from larger garden centres and are well worth using in support of successful organic gardening. More details appear in our *Pests & Diseases* leaflet.
- Keep soils well watered, especially for fruit and vegetables. Diseases such as powdery mildew are worse in dry soils.
- Act quickly at the first sign of infection - cut out any infected woody plant material or dig up and destroy infested plants.
- If chemical pesticides are essential, choose short-lasting plant-derived substances, with low toxicity to birds and mammals.



Soil Fertility

IMPROVING SOIL FERTILITY

Fertile soil helps promote good growth, keeping plants healthy and less prone to pest and disease attack. Therefore, when gardening organically, it is essential to work hard to improve and maintain your soil's fertility.

Enrich soils annually with humus by adding organic material such as well-rotted farmyard manure, garden compost, well-weathered mushroom compost and cocoa shell which are harmless to wildlife and help improve the structure and fertility of the soil. Dig heavy-textured soils in autumn or early winter, and light textured soils in spring, incorporating organic matter as evenly as possible through the top 20cm.

Wormeries designed for the decomposition of kitchen waste provide a useful, if limited, quantity of organic matter. For more information on making your own garden compost see our leaflet on *Managing Your Soil*.

ORGANIC FERTILISERS: Organic fertilisers are available, derived from vegetable or animal matter, to give plants the right balance of foods. However, they are often slow-acting so apply them in good time. The main plant foods include:

- Nitrogen for leaf & stem growth
 - Phosphorous for roots
 - Potash for flowers and fruit
- Lesser amounts of trace elements are needed such as: Calcium, Iron,

Boron, Manganese and Magnesium.

The following organic plant foods can be added to the soil according to the manufacturer's recommendations:

- **mushroom compost** - contains a well-rooted range of nutrients
 - **liquid seaweed extract** - with nitrogen, potash and phosphate
 - **bonemeal or hoof and horn** - phosphate and some nitrogen
 - **wood ash** - some nitrogen, phosphates and potassium
 - **fish, blood & bone** - a general fertiliser with phosphate, nitrogen and potassium
 - **dried blood** - nitrogen
 - **garden lime** - calcium
 - **concentrated animal manures** - nitrogen, phosphates, potash.
- Liquid organic fertilisers offer nitrogen, phosphate and potash in fast-acting formulations and are useful for container-grown plants.

SUPPLEMENTS: Because bulky organic manures provide limited nutrients for demanding fruit and vegetable crops, and some types, such as leaf mould, provide very few nutrients indeed, you may need to apply additional fertiliser base and top dressings.

Adding lime will help contribute calcium to the soil and adjust the soil pH conditions as necessary.

HANDLING: Wear gloves when handling manures and fertilisers and a face mask if products are formulated as fine powders.



Management

GOOD PLANT MANAGEMENT

To get the most from your plants, pay attention to their growing requirements. This is even more important in organic gardens, as you cannot rely on chemicals to help prop up any mistakes.

- First choose the right site for a plant - check the label to see if it prefers a sunny location, acid soil or some form of support.
- Prepare and improve the soil (see panel left), removing all weeds.
- Sow seeds at the correct time, in the right conditions - the seed packets will tell you when
- By raising ornamental plants and vegetables in pots, you can wait until conditions are ideal before planting them.
- Keep plants well watered (see our leaflet on *Feeding & Watering* for irrigation techniques) and use mulches (below) or plastic to conserve water and deter weeds.

- Place protective barriers such as fleece (above) or clear plastic over fruit or vegetable crops to exclude or deter pests.
- Try companion planting when growing vegetables; African marigolds are said to repel aphids and *Echinacea* (below) attract aphid-eating hover flies.
- If plants have not been thinned sufficiently or are growing too closely together, air flow will be reduced, which may encourage diseases such as grey mould.
- Destroy crop remnants, which may harbour pests and diseases, before any new-season plantings.
- Use a crop rotation plan to ensure different crops are grown on the same soil - and don't replant roses on the same site.
- In plant catalogues, look out for pest and disease-resistant ornamental plants and vegetables.

