A Healthy Growing Area

Keeping your growing area in good health, rather than just pest and disease free, is at the heart of organic growing. Creating a diverse and vigorous growing system, good hygiene, and close observation all help prevent problems.

To achieve a healthy growing area, you should:

- **Keep your soil in good condition.**
- **Source healthy plants which are well suited to where they will grow.**
- **Be observant** – often problems arise from failing to spot the first signs of disease. Frequent and early intervention prevents problems escalating.
- **Practise good hygiene.**

In this section we look at:

- **Keeping plants and soil in good health**
- **Sourcing plants, seeds and bulbs**
- **Cleaning tools, greenhouses and polytunnels**
- **Healthy growth in pots and other containers**

Keeping Plants and Soil in Good Health

BEST ORGANIC PRACTICE

- **Create a fertile, biologically active soil.** Add composted organic materials to help reduce soil pests and diseases, and to encourage strong plant growth. (See **Soil Cultivation Techniques** on p. 8).
- **Start with healthy plants.** Seeds, tubers, plants, fruit bushes, shrubs should all be organic in origin and show no signs of disease. (See **Sourcing Your Plants** on p. 46).
- **Grow plants that suit the location and soil type.** Plants won't thrive if they are not in their ideal habitat e.g. plants that are acid loving in an alkaline soil; those that need full sun or good drainage in a shady, damp area. A weak plant is prone to pests and diseases.
- **Choose varieties with some resistance to pest and disease.** With ever-improving organic plant breeding this is certainly possible.
- **Grow a mix of plants.** This not only provides food, shelter and habitats for wildlife but also helps prevent diseases spreading.
- **Choose sowing and planting dates to avoid specific pests and diseases.** If you plant out tender young green shoots too early, for instance, it can make them susceptible to pests such as aphids. Allow them to mature and harden off before planting out.
- **Plan your planting to include crop rotation.** Avoid planting the same vegetable family in the same place each year. This not only prevents build-up of diseases, but also makes the best use of the soil's nutrients.
- **Keep a good airflow around plants.** To prevent the spread of diseases, prune trees and bushes to create space between branches; keep greenhouses and polytunnels well ventilated; and give space around pots and containers.
- **Careful watering.** Make sure plants are watered sufficiently – neither too much or too little. Always apply water to the soil rather than the plant foliage to prevent moist conditions where diseases can thrive.

FOR ADVICE ON:

1. How to manage your soil, go to www.gardenorganic.org.uk/managing-your-soil
2. Planning your planting, go to www.gardenorganic.org.uk/planting-plan-and-crop-rotation

Sourcing Plants, Seeds and Bulbs

Growing your own plants from saved seeds and cuttings is ideal. It is now possible to add to your varieties by using commercially available organic seeds, plants, bulbs and tubers. If you can't get any at your local garden centre, be sure to ask them why – and whether they can start stocking them. Also check if the soil/compost any plant is grown in is certified organic, without peat and without added pesticides. Very often garden centres will buy in plants with neonicotinoids added to the soil to prevent pests. These chemicals will be taken up by the plant and then affect pollinating insects.

Often specialist nurseries take greater care over the soil and where they source their plants. It is worth seeking them out and checking if their soil is peat and pesticide free.

BEST ORGANIC PRACTICE

- **Home saved seed and plants,** from disease-free parent plants. Helpful guidelines on seed saving are at **www.gardenorganic.org.uk**.
- **Home grown 'swapped' seed and plants from another organic grower.** Be cautious that you don't inadvertently import disease or pernicious weeds.
- **Seeds, tubers, sets, bulbs, and plants with an organic symbol** from an approved organic certification body.
- **Container grown plants in a peat-free mix,** with an accredited organic symbol.

ACCEPTABLE, FOR OCCASIONAL USE

- **Seeds, tubers, sets and bulbs from non-organic sources,** if unavailable as organic. But check *Not Acceptable* below.
- **Container grown plants and cuttings** without an accredited organic symbol. However, check they are in a peat-free growing media.

NOT ACCEPTABLE IN ORGANIC GROWING

- **Plants taken from the wild.** This can destroy natural habitats and deplete natural specimens.
- **Genetically modified seeds and plants.**
- **Container grown plants that have pesticides within the growing mix.** Check with the supplier, as the soil often contains neonicotinoids, which are used to kill insects.
- **Seeds, bulbs, sets and tubers treated with fungicides.** Check with supplier, or be sure to source organic materials.

Cleaning Tools, Greenhouses, Polytunnels, Pots and Containers

Keeping your growing equipment clean helps prevent diseases multiplying.

Green houses and polytunnels should be washed and wiped down annually, both inside and out. This prevents a build up of dust or algae on the outside, which stops clear sunlight entering, and helps destroy overwintering pests and diseases. Any empty pots and containers should also be checked and rinsed to clear overwintering snails and pests.

Keeping your tools clean will prevent transmission of any disease. This combination of good hygiene methods, and checking your plants regularly, means you won't need unnecessary chemicals.

BEST ORGANIC PRACTICE

- **Hot water/steam** and scrubbing of all working areas.

ACCEPTABLE, FOR OCCASIONAL USE

- **Pressure-washing**
- **Wash with natural plant essences, including citrus juices.** These are available from organic suppliers such as *The Organic Catalogue*.
- **Use natural cleaning products,** such as vinegar, bicarbonate of soda.

NOT ACCEPTABLE IN ORGANIC GROWING

- **Use of domestic cleaning liquids such as bleach.** They contain strong chemicals which are poisonous to wildlife.

Explanations of **highlighted** words can be found in the Glossary on page 50

Growing in Pots and Containers

If you enjoy growing in pots and containers, you can still follow the organic gardening principles. Think about what your containers are made of (see **Use Resources Responsibly** on p. 22) and be aware that anything growing in a restricted environment will always be more reliant on additional watering and feeding (see **Fertilisers and Liquid Feeds,** p. 15). Plants could also be more prone to pest and disease (see **Avoid Using Harmful Chemicals** on p. 32).

BEST ORGANIC PRACTICE

- **Use an organic growing medium,** ideally home-made compost/soil mix, which provides the correct nutrients for the plant.
- **Use homemade paper pots, wooden trays, recycled non-plastic food containers.**
- **Hanging basket liners made from recycled, biodegradable materials** such as moss from the lawn, hay, or an old pure wool jumper.
- **To clean containers, use steam, hot water, or a high pressure hose.**
- **Maintain a good airflow** between plants, to prevent diseases spreading.

ALSO ACCEPTABLE

- **Commercially bought organic peat free growing medium.**
- **Commercially available biodegradable hanging basket liners.**
- **Reused plastic pots and trays, clay pots** (see **Use of Plastic**, p. 29 and **Appendix 3**, p. 55).
- **Commercially available pots and containers made from paper, plant wastes and other biodegradable material,** excluding peat.
- **Composted organic materials and fertilisers for addition feeding** (see **Soil Improvers** on p. 10).

ACCEPTABLE, FOR OCCASIONAL USE

- **Use organic liquid feeds,** and other organic tonics, only when necessary.
- **Reused food stuff cans –** except those with a chrome lining.

NOT ACCEPTABLE IN ORGANIC GROWING

- **Tyres as a container for growing food crops,** unless lined first. It is thought that tyres will leach various toxic chemicals into the soil as they degrade when in contact with sun and water.
- **Moss gathered from the wild** for hanging basket liners.
- **Hydroponic systems.** These use no soil, just water with fertiliser in solution. This goes against the fundamental premise of organic growing, which uses biologically active soil.
- **Pots or growing mixes made from peat.** The extraction of peat causes the loss of an ancient habitat, vital for supporting local and often rare life systems. It should never be used. Filtered or recycled peat has been reclaimed from rivers/streams running out of peat land. Some argue that this is still damaging to the natural environment.

FOR ADVICE ON:

1. How to grow in containers, go to www.gardenorganic.org.uk/container-growing
2. How to make a soil/compost mix for container growing, go to www.gardenorganic.org.uk/peat-free-growing
3. How to make comfrey liquid feed, go to www.gardenorganic.org.uk/comfrey