

## **Staffs Life – Organic Gardening**

**By Diana Muir of the Plant Plot garden centre**

### **How does your garden grow?**

Is your garden organic? Converting to organic gardening isn't as daunting as it may sound. It's almost as simple as going back to basics and managing your plot without the use of pesticides and other chemicals. Organic gardening takes us back many decades to a time when there simply were no chemical sprays and treatments. However we have a lot more knowledge these days and an understanding of how much better food tastes when it is left alone. As a nation we are more aware of the provenance of our food so are proud to declare the food we are eating is not only from our own garden but is also organic.

Organic gardening uses different techniques to protect against pests and also encourage wildlife into a safe environment. Here are the Plant Plot's top tips.

- 1      **Throw out the chemicals!**** Start as you mean to go on - throw out all those weed killers and artificial sprays.
- 2      **Prepare your soil for organic growth.**** Crucial to the success of your garden is the soil. Buy a soil testing kit and test different areas of the garden and check out your neighbours' gardens to see what grows well in your local area. If the soil needs improvement, have some good quality compost or leaf mulch ready to dig in. This will help the soil to hold nutrients and drain more effectively. To ensure a good supply of compost for the future, invest in a compost bin and collect vegetable peelings, teabags, egg-shells, grass clippings and so on. In no time at all, you will have lovely, rich compost to dig in when you need it.
- 3      **Plant wisely.**** Look at the plants you already have in the garden and make sure they are as healthy as they can be and are in the right place for best performance. Some plants are more prone to disease and pests than others so try to make sure you do not have too many susceptible plants. To keep weeds down, use a bark or straw covering for your beds and vegetable patch and pull out any before they get well established.
- 4      **Encourage wildlife.**** Don't be afraid of making wildlife work for you – encourage frogs, birds and hedgehogs as they will help to keep down troublesome pests such as greenfly and blackfly. Install bug and nature boxes and create habitats for them – the Plant Plot has a great range.
- 5      **Combat pests naturally.**** If pests become a problem, there are many natural products on the market to help combat them – for example, you can buy microscopic eel worms that destroy vine weevil grubs. Careful planting and rotation of crops will help cut down on plant diseases. Certain vegetables should not be grown in the same place each year and companion planting can help deter pests. A well-known combination is French Marigolds and tomatoes – plant these together and it will help deter white fly.

Remember, there are no perfect gardens – all gardeners have problems but it is often just a matter of keeping a regular eye on things. Ensure plants are kept under control and if pests are spotted, try and deal with them straight away. The odd nibbled leaf or failed plant is not a disaster – it is all part of learning to love your garden and developing your skills.

Here are some natural ways to control unwanted visitors to your garden:

**Beer:** Place old yoghurt pots on top of the soil close to your plants, wait until dusk and then fill them with the cheapest—but freshest—beer you can find. The next morning, they will be filled with drunken slugs – just right for the compost!

**Coffee:** Try a coffee spray at full strength directly on slugs and snails as they don't like caffeine. You can also surround plants under attack with a mulch of used coffee grounds as a deterrent and to feed the plants.

**Iron phosphate:** Simply scatter 'Growing success' slug pellets around your plants – they will wipe out the pests without using poison and as they are organically certified, they can be used around children, pets and wildlife.

**Copper:** Slugs get a shock when they touch copper. You can buy ready-made copper plant guards or just adorn your raised bed frames with copper flashing. Glue some pennies around the tops of your containers – they look good and work just as well.

**Citrus:** Put old lettuce leaves, lemon, orange and grapefruit rinds out overnight near slug prone plants. They'll be covered with slugs first thing the next morning.

**Hand pick:** For low numbers of bugs, such as caterpillars, they can sometimes be handpicked and removed from the plant. If the numbers are much higher, you could also remove the affected leaves to take out larger quantities of the offending bug.

**Bugs:** Many bugs in the garden feed on other bugs. Ladybugs and lacewings are ideal as they keep many other bugs and aphids under control.

**Birds:** Birds prey on insects for food so encourage them to your garden with regular rewards such as food and a birdhouse or birdbath

**Sawdust or oat bran:** Same method, different deterrent. Both can be sprinkled around the plant area and will stop bugs in their tracks. Sawdust hinders movement and oat bran is lethal to many bugs. Broken egg shells around a plant can work too.

There are lots of these wonderful methods of natural pest control, often passed down through the generations. Let us know if you have any others that you know are successful!

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