

ORGANIC GARDENING IN THE MARITIMES 101



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The Voice of Organics in Atlantic Canada

So you want to start a garden?

Gardening is easier than you might think, and the pleasure of picking and eating food you've grown yourself, or watching a bed of perennials come into full bloom, is hard to beat.

Organic gardening focuses on building soil health, and working with, not against, natural systems. It also allows you to avoid chemical inputs, helps prevent soil erosion, and can increase biodiversity in your area.

We'd like to help you get started.

Inside you'll find enough basic information on soil, composting and mulching to start your own organic garden. We've also listed several helpful web resources for more information—but don't hesitate to ask your neighbours, friends, and the staff at your local garden centre. One of the great things about gardening is that there is always more to learn and lots of people willing to share their experiences and advice!

First: Choose a good spot and plan your garden layout.

An ideal spot for growing veggies is very sunny, sheltered from the wind, and has good soil drainage (ie. is not usually soggy or damp). Vegetable plots can be all shapes and sizes. You can also grow vegetables in raised beds, containers, hanging baskets and flowerbeds. Sketch out a design and think about how much of each crop you'd like to grow. Remember to allow enough space in your design between plants—they don't like crowding, and make sure you can access each row without trampling other plants.

Seed catalogues are a great source of information about spacing & yields, and we have listed several helpful resources on the back of this flyer. Generally, vegetables are annuals (only live for one season) and should be rotated (or planted in a different plot) each year to maximize soil health. Make sure any perennial vegetables (those that come back each year), such as asparagus and strawberries, are separated from the annuals in different beds.

Choose the right plants for the right places! Let nature give you a hand—think carefully about the sun and wind exposure, drainage, and soil quality in the spot you are hoping to plant. Look at the proposed plot several times/day to check sun exposure! Leafy veggies can tolerate part shade, but fruiting plants will require full sun. This is especially important if you are planting trees, shrubs, and perennials. Ask at your garden centre for help choosing native plants, or plants that will thrive in (or at least tolerate) your particular conditions.

You might also consider *companion planting*—or putting side-by-side plants that naturally help each other out. This can help prevent pests and improve growing. For instance, beans will bring the nitrogen that carrots need into the soil, and mint repels the slugs that would eat your lettuce. **The Book "Carrots Love Tomatoes"* by Louise Riotte is the classic text, but information can easily be found on the web.

***** SOIL *****

Organic gardening is all about soil. Get familiar with yours! Grab a handful, squeeze it in your palm—is it densely compacted or loose and crumbly? Clay-like or sandy? The best sort of soil for growing is loam. Loam is dark, soft and crumbly. While it holds water, it also allows for drainage and is fairly easy to dig. Loam is also very fertile as it is rich in humus.

HUMUS is basically decomposing organic matter. In the forest, rainfall and worms help to work the decomposing leaves and woodchips that naturally accumulate on the forest floor back into the soil. This humus loosens soil structure and can simultaneously hold moisture and improve drainage. It's also full of micro-organisms that help make nutrients available to your plants.

Not many of us in Atlantic Canada are lucky enough to have very loamy soil. Chances are, if you are starting with a plot in your backyard, your soil will be quite compacted (from rain and walking on it) and could use a boost in terms of organic matter and nutrients. The best bet, regardless of your soil type, is to pull off the top layer of sod and dig extra humus into your soil—it improves the texture, pH balance, and increases fertility! And the best way to create humus and improve your soil is to make compost using your kitchen and yard waste!

In a hurry?

Do start a compost heap (we'll tell you how next)! Even if it won't be ready for spring planting, you can always "top dress" your garden with compost later, and have piles of lovely loamy humus ready to go into your garden next spring. To get your garden started in the meantime, ask around for sources of *composted* manure and clean top soil. Bagged sheep manure, organic compost mixes, and top soil are readily available at most garden centres and will get your soil ready to go right away. There are many different techniques you can use to prepare your beds—one popular method is "double digging," you can find detailed instructions on the web.

*** COMPOSTING ***

Make your own humus! It's easy and will add important organic matter and nutrients to your soil. Composting is created according to a simple formula:

Carbon materials

(dry & brown, like dead leaves, straw, etc.)

+ Nitrogen materials

(moist & green, like veggie scraps, fresh weeds, etc.)

+ air

+ moisture

+ time

= great compost

A compost heap speeds the breakdown of organic matter so you can put all those naturally occurring nutrients and micro-organisms back in your soil. A good compost system has no odour, so it's perfect for all backyards! You can build your own housing (see designs on the web) or use a commercial unit. It should be in a sunny, well-drained area, and turned or mixed every few weeks, with new materials added in.

The decomposition can take anywhere from 2 months to 2 years, but when it is ready it should be dark in colour, crumbly, and have an earthy smell. To speed it up make sure your organic matter is shredded or broken into small pieces, turn and stir the heap more often, or add red wiggler worms or a compost tea to kick start the process.

USE

- leaves, grass, yard trimmings
- weeds, dead plants (disease and seed free!)
- sawdust and woodchips (from non-treated wood!)
- straw, hay
- manures
- topsoil, old potting soil
- egg shells, coffee grounds and filters, tea bags
- fruit and veggie kitchen scraps

DON'T USE

- meat, fish or bones
- fats and oils, sauces
- dairy products
- pet waste

*** PLANTING ***

Once your garden is laid out and your soil is ready to go it's time to start planting! Look for organic seeds and/or heirloom varieties, and avoid genetically engineered seeds (see list of suppliers). Many veggies can easily be started from seeds planted directly into your garden (ie. spinach, radish, carrots, beans, peas, etc.), but some do better if they are started indoors (tomatoes, peppers, etc.). They also need to be planted at certain times during the season, and at various depths in the soil, to ensure proper germination and that they have enough time to reach maturity.

Seed packages and catalogues should indicate whether to start indoors or out, and how many days the plant takes to reach maturity, but ask at your garden centre or check out the websites listed for more detailed advice. Remember to think about spacing! Starting your own seedlings indoors is easy—use shallow containers and a good seeding mix on a sunny windowsill. Or you can find transplants ready to go at a garden centre or community plant swap.

*** MULCHING ***

Mulching is a wonderful labour and resource-saving technique. "Mulch" is simply a material used to cover the soil surface around your plants. You can use a wide range of materials—leaf waste and shredded yard trimmings, shredded bark, sawdust (from untreated wood!), seaweed or eel grass, landscaping fabric or plastic sheet mulch, newspaper, gravel or stone chips.

Some mulches are more attractive than others, but they all serve several important purposes:

- by blocking the light mulching can help control weeds (mulch must be about 2 inches thick!)
- it also helps conserve moisture and keep the soil surface from drying out between rains
- it helps insulate your soil, moderating the temperature
- it helps prevent soil compaction from heavy rainfall

*** ALL SET? ***

We hope this guide is helpful and encourages you to start growing your own food and flowers now!

Great local resources:

*Find out if there is a gardening club in your area, look for Seedy Saturday events, or search the ACORN database for the nearest community garden.

*ACORN's webinars, workshops, and conference notes are available on our website!

www.acornorganic.org

*Your local garden centre!

Regional producers of organic/heritage seed:

Hope Seeds, Mapple Farms, Annapolis Valley Heritage Seeds, Vesey's, Halifax Seed Co.

Books:

* *Grow Organic: A simple guide to vegetable gardening in Nova Scotia* by Elizabeth Pierce

* *East Coast Gardener* by Marjorie Willison

* *Wild Plants of Eastern Canada* by Marilyn Walker

On the web:

*Canadian Organic Growers: www.cog.ca

*Seeds of Diversity Canada: www.seeds.ca

*SeeMore Green Garden Collective blog:

www.seemoregreen.wordpress.com

*Jodi DeLong's East Coast gardening blog:

www.bloomingwriter.blogspot.com

* www.HalifaxGardenNetwork.com

* www.cornhillnursery.com

* www.gardenwiseonline.ca

* www.yougrowgirl.com

* www.icangarden.ca

* www.johnnyseeds.com

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Check out our website and join us today!

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