



urban  
agriculture  
AUSTRALIA



## How to get started with organic gardening

### What is Organic Gardening?

Organic gardening is an easy method to produce nutritious food in an environmentally sustainable way using living soil organisms to provide a rich and fertile soil.

### How to get started

There are four requirements for a successful garden: adequate light, an efficient watering system, an active soil biology and plants appropriate for the season. These conditions can be found or developed in most backyards, verges and even in courtyards and balconies.


#### Light

Most fruiting plants require at least 6 hours of sunshine a day but leafy greens such as lettuce, kale etc as well as plants such as leeks and garlic can get by with less. The first step in establishing a food garden is to find a location which gets a minimum of 5 to 6 hours sunshine a day.

#### Soil

The key to nutritious food is fertile soil. Organic gardeners rely on the organisms which inhabit soil to break down organic matter into plant nutrients within the soil. These nutrients can be accessed by plants through their root systems. Compost and decaying organic matter are the food supply for all soil organisms. Copious amounts of compost are added to the soil to feed soil organisms. These in turn feed the plants by making the plant nutrients contained in the compost available to the plant roots.

Compost is easy to make from kitchen scraps and garden waste. Compost bins are available commercially or can easily be constructed by the gardener. If it is not possible to have a compost bin, for example on a balcony or in a courtyard, there are alternatives such as a worm farm or a bokashi bin. Both of these methods are suitable for very small spaces and do not smell. Worm castings are a very rich source of plant nutrients which can be used in the same way as compost on pots as well as in a traditional garden bed. The worm juice which is a byproduct of a worm farm can be used a liquid fertilizer, either on leaves as a foliar fertiliser or directly on soil or potting mix.



With its focus on ecology, Organic Gardening addresses many Permaculture Principles, including 'obtain a yield', 'use and value renewable resources and services' and 'produce no waste'.

A bokashi bin is sealed and can be kept in the kitchen. It ferments food scraps. The fermented scraps can be added to the compost bin or buried in the garden. Bokashi has the advantage of being able to deal with meat so that no organic materials ever need to be sent to landfill.

Using these methods, the fertility of any soil can easily be made suitable for growing a wide range of plants. Organic growers avoid using soluble industrial chemical fertilisers to provide plant nutrients to the soil as they can severely interfere with or, in some cases, destroy the soil organisms which are the basis of soil fertility.

### Water

All plants and soil organisms require water to survive. The most efficient method of supplying water to the soil is the use of drippers. Drippers provide water very slowly so that the water has time to penetrate deeply into the soil without running off. Runoff is wasted water. Overwatering also washes away plant nutrients which then find their way into storm water systems, polluting our water ways.

Watering deeply and less often is preferable to watering a little and frequently. Deep watering encourages plant roots to grow deeply into the soil seeking water. It enables the plant to survive hot dry conditions much better than a plant that has been watered a little and frequently. Frequently watered plants usually have very shallow root systems which cannot cope well with the hot dry conditions of summer.

Water loss from the soil and pots can be significantly reduced by the use of coarse mulches about 50mm deep on the soil surface.

Mulches also keep soil temperatures cooler for the roots. Organic mulches are preferable as they also break down over time providing plant nutrients to the soil, but gravel mulches can also be useful in some circumstances. For plants in pots it is useful to shade the pot from direct sun to prevent roots becoming too hot.

Efficient watering not only has the environmental advantage of reducing the diversion of water from the environment, it also considerably reduces the financial cost of maintaining a garden.

### Plants

Plants grown in the appropriate season and suitable for the climate will be much more healthy and easy to grow than plants grown outside their normal environmental range. There are several web sites which provide month by month planting guides for a large variety of plants. For the Canberra climate, the Canberra Organic Growers Society ([www.cogs.asn.au](http://www.cogs.asn.au)) provides month by month planting guides which allow the home gardener to have food in the garden and ready to be picked every month of the year.

Growing our own food organically is easy. Once the garden is established, it does not require much time or space to make a significant contribution to our food supply. We also know the food is fresh and not contaminated by chemicals. For those where time and space are constraints, even a small growing space can provide foods we particularly like or are difficult to buy or are expensive.



### For further information on this topic

#### The Canberra Organic Growers Society

The Canberra Organic Growers Society was formed in 1977 with the aim of providing a forum for organic growers to exchange information and encourage the general public to adopt organic growing methods.

To contact the Canberra Organic Growers Society or find out more about courses and workshops visit their website at [www.cogs.asn.au](http://www.cogs.asn.au)