



Easy with Growing the Instant Organic Gardener

THREE STEPS TO A GREAT
ORGANIC GARDEN —
IT'S EASIER THAN YOU THINK

by Don Rosenberg

Editor's Note: After 27 years in the retail music industry, Charlottean Don Rosenberg decided to take a different tack in November 2006 when he turned his passion for gardening into his life's business. The North Carolina Master Gardener has been growing organic vegetables in his back yard for more than 20 years and realized novice and experienced home gardeners alike need help with their organic gardens — from planning through harvest. With this new monthly column, CW readers will learn tips and tricks from the Instant Organic Gardener to reap their own bountiful harvests year-round.

If one of your resolutions this year is to find a way to eat healthy, why not start an organic vegetable garden? My goal each month will be to show you how easy and rewarding a garden can be — for your family, your health and your budget. If you've never had a garden before, don't fear. It's a lot easier than you think — especially if you use some tricks I've learned over the past 20 years of backyard gardening.

Our first trick is to go organic. Yes, I know you've heard it's harder to grow an organic garden than one using chemicals, but that's for commercial growers with acres of crops. A home gardener can do just fine.

The difference between organic and chemical gardens is the approach. A chemical gardener focuses on plants: He pretty much sprays, dusts and fertilizes everything. The problem — other than the fact that chemicals are nasty, dangerous and expensive — can be seen in what I call "the vicious chemical cycle." A gardener sees a wimpy plant and decides to add some fertilizer. Chemical fertilizers are like an electric shock and cause the plant to grow whether it wants to or not, leading to rapid, spindly growth. This new growth is tender and weak, just what bugs and diseases like to attack your plant.

Next, when our gardener sees some bugs munching on his tomatoes, out come the pesticides. The problem with pesticides is they affect the entire garden and end up killing the 90 percent of good bugs that eat the 10 percent bad bugs. They also hurt the soil fertility. The solution? More synthetic fertilizer; and there you are, caught in that vicious chemical cycle.

When you become an organic gardener, you focus on the soil. You understand that healthy soil means healthy plants that grow at the proper pace and end up with thick green stems and leaves that resist bugs and diseases naturally. And most important, healthy soil yields the tastiest

vegetables! When a problem occurs, it's usually with a single pest on a single crop and we look up an organic solution instead of a one-size-fits-all spray program.

The second trick is to go small. A common home garden might be a plot that is 20 feet by 20 feet. That's 400 square feet to weed and water! Instead, rethink your approach and select crops that require little space and produce a good yield per square foot. I call this approach *FRESNO*, which has nothing to do with California. I look for plants that taste better *fresh*, are *rare* varieties that are *expensive* in the stores, save *space*, are *nutritious* and have an *ongoing* harvest.

This means you'll have to skip some common garden crops like corn, broccoli and watermelons, but you can grow almost everything else. A family of four actually can harvest 80 percent of the fresh vegetables from a 400-square-foot garden in just 40 feet of space. Leave the big stuff to the local growers and frequent the farmers market.

The third trick is to be lazy. Yes, lazy. Embrace the concept. No one has time for a garden that takes an hour a day to weed. And the best long-term investment you can make to reduce your gardening workload is to buy some high-quality potting mix. Why? Because you start immediately with perfect soil and it's weedless. Weeding is two-thirds of the work in a garden. Mix in some slow-release, organic fertilizer — all good garden centers have it — and you're good to go. I suggest building simple raised beds to contain your perfect new soil.

So, go organic, go small and be lazy. It's easy! Over the next year we'll work together to pick the right plants (what fresh veggies do you love?), plant the right seeds, water wisely and then enjoy a bountiful harvest, with less work than you ever thought possible. I look forward to our gardening journey together. Let's get growing! □

E-mail your gardening questions to gardener@thecharlotteweekly.com.