



Women's
Environmental
Network

briefing

Grow your own organic food

Why grow organic?

Organic growing is gardening without using artificial fertilisers and chemical pesticides. It uses natural methods which create a balance of wildlife to encourage healthy plant growth and control pests. Traditional small scale growing (often by women) has used these techniques successfully for thousands of years. **Women produce more than half the world's food and yet they own only 1% of the world's land.**

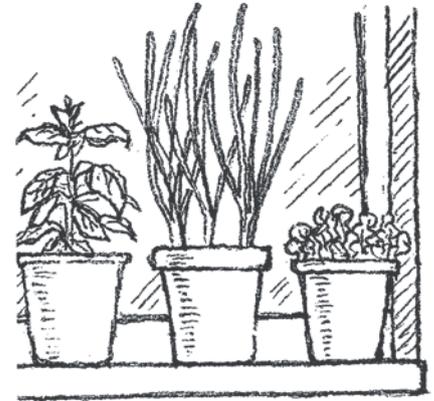
Some reasons for growing your own organic food are: It saves money; it tastes great; it helps to keep you fit; you know that you are not eating genetically engineered foods or pesticides; it can be therapeutic and it saves on packaging. Fresh, organic vegetables are often more nourishing than non-organic ones. Organic carrots for example, have a high concentration of nutrients in the skin and only need to be washed, but non-organic carrots, which have been treated with organophosphates, must be peeled so important nutrients are lost.

Growing organic food means that you have control over what you eat. You and your family and friends may already have growing skills and knowledge about methods like this.

Somewhere to grow

You will need a sunny space with access to water. It could be a space amongst a flower border, some pots, a windowsill or balcony. Organic gardener John Leavon estimates that it is possible to grow enough fresh produce for a small family, for one year, on 3.5m² (the size of a double bed sheet). Contact local growing groups: there may be people who want to share an allotment or garden or join one of the groups in WEN's *Taste of a Better Future* network (see p4).

Ask your local council for a list of allotment sites. Allotments are very cheap to rent and often do not have waiting lists. Look around your area and talk to allotment holders to find a site that is secure, well kept and close to you, then contact the lettings officer - usually another allotment holder.



Chemical cocktails

Pesticides are not selective. As well as pests, they kill 'gardener's friends', insects such as ladybirds, lacewings and beetles that naturally control pests by eating them. Pesticides also poison birds and animals which eat insects and this affects the balance of nature.

Nitrates from artificial fertilisers can leach into water and poison rivers, killing fish and other water life.

Checking the soil

When you have a growing site, find out what the land has been used for before you start growing food in it - inner city areas may have been contaminated by industry in the past. Your local authority may be able to tell you about the history of the land use.

Testing the soil for industrial contamination is very expensive. A local university may be able to test the soil for free or for a small charge. Otherwise you will have to contact a private soil testing company.

If there is any risk that the soil in your growing space has been contaminated, it is safer to grow vegetables in containers or raised beds. If your site is a patch of concrete, you could build raised beds on top of this or grow food in containers. Organisations such as Elm Farm Research Centre offer a soil analysis service for organic growers, to detect plant nutrient deficiencies in the soil. For more info see our website contacts page:

www.wen.org.uk/local_food/contacts.htm

The WEN local food project offers support and training to groups of women growing food in urban areas.

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When can you start?

Any time is a good time to start setting up a growing space. You may have to wait for the soil to warm up before planting seeds outside but there is always something to do if you want to start growing your own food.

JANUARY

Make a plan of your growing site. Make a compost heap. Trim hedges and trees. Dig over beds roughly.

FEBRUARY

Sow broad beans and onion sets outside. To reuse plant pots, wash the containers ready for planting later in the year.

MARCH

Sow early potatoes. Cover beds with compost or well rotted manure. Prepare beds for sowing seeds.

APRIL

Sow late potatoes. Sow tomatoes, aubergines and courgettes indoors.

MAY

Sow seeds outside. Plant out tender plants after danger of frost has passed.

JUNE

Sow salads and peas every week so that they are not all ready at once. Make some comfrey liquid fertiliser.

JULY

Feed plants in containers with dilute comfrey liquid. Water crops regularly.

AUGUST

Sow winter salads such as oriental brassicas and rocket.

SEPTEMBER

As you harvest crops, fill bare patches with fast-growing salad crops or 'green manures' such as mustard or field beans.

OCTOBER

Collect autumn leaves for a leaf mould heap. Leave it for 18 months - two years to break down into a humus-rich mulch.

NOVEMBER

Plant trees and bushes. Store vegetables in boxes of sand in a cool dry place. Dig in manure. Cover any bare soil. Sow early broad beans to avoid Spring blackfly attacks.

DECEMBER

Order seeds. Sow onion sets and garlic. Check over and mend tools.

What do you need?

You will need some **tools** to start with. Get a **fork** and a **spade** first, to dig the soil, then a **watering can**. A **trowel** or small fork is good for planting things. A **rake** and a **hoe** are useful for sowing seeds and weeding. You may be able to borrow tools or buy them from car boot sales.



You can collect **seeds** from shop-bought vegetables. Easy seeds to collect are peppers, squash, aubergines, tomatoes, garlic bulbs. Ask other gardeners or allotment groups if they can spare some seeds. You can buy seeds from garden centres or organic seed catalogues. Follow the sowing instructions on the packet.

Keep a journal of what you plant, when, where - and if it was a success. This will help you learn what grows best in your plot or containers.



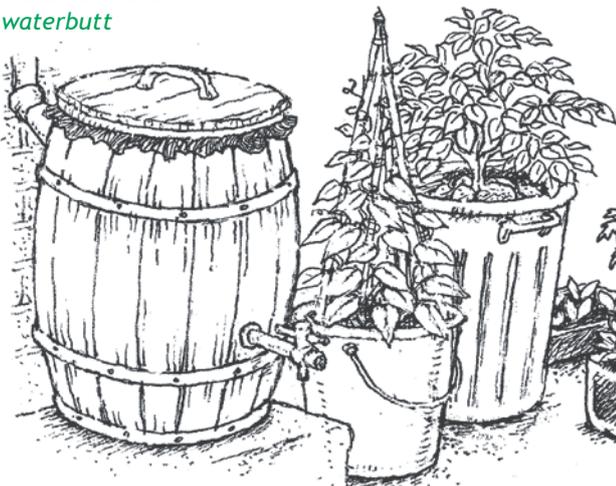
Saving water

If your plot is near your home, try to use your bath and washing up water for your plants.

Grow groundcover plants around larger plants, and water in the evening or early morning to cut down on evaporation from the soil.

If you have a shed or a greenhouse on your plot, install guttering and you can collect rainwater in a water butt.

Collect rainwater in a waterbutt



Potatoes in an old dustbin

Trailing tomatoes in a bucket

Runner beans in large pots on the ground

What to grow

Older varieties of seeds are often less fussy than modern hybrids and the vegetables often have a better flavour. A diversity of plants encourages wildlife and does not exhaust the soil. This gives more protection from diseases, pests and soil deficiencies. Grow food which is expensive or hard to find in the shops. Pumpkins and squashes are available in many different varieties as seeds and they keep well. Coriander is easy to grow.

Mooli (white radish) can be grown as easily as red radishes. Chillies grow well on sunny windowsills or in a sheltered sunny place outside. Pink fir apple potatoes are a tasty old variety. Chard, rocket, cabbage and kale are useful green vegetables for a late harvest. Grow your own mixed salad - expensive to buy, but quick and easy to grow, with a long harvesting season. You can include oriental leaves such as mizuna and mustard

Feeding the soil

To keep plants supplied with food, you need to take care of the soil around them. Composting and mulching are two methods that will help you build up a fertile soil, even if the land hasn't been used for growing plants before. You can buy organic compost but it's cheaper to make it yourself.

Making compost

Compost adds nutrients to the soil as it breaks down and improves the soil structure. Make compost from virtually any organic matter - collecting kitchen and garden waste is the easiest way to do this. You can add egg shells, tea bags, grass cuttings, screwed up or shredded paper and cardboard egg boxes to your compost heap. Don't put animal bones or meat in it - they will attract rats.

Make compost in a shop-bought container, an old dustbin or make one out of old pallets. Or you can contact us for a copy of our video, *WEN's Guide to Building a Community Compost Bin*. Just pile everything in. Successful composting needs moisture, air, and a mixture of organic materials.

You may need to turn the compost heap occasionally to speed it up.

Mulching

Mulching means putting a thick layer on top of the soil. You could use dry grass cuttings, leaf mould or wood chippings.

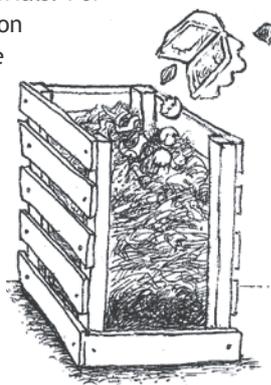
It doesn't add nutrients to the soil, but prevents water evaporating and smothers weeds. Mulch slowly breaks down and helps keep a good soil structure.

If you are starting a new garden from scratch, mulching is an easy way of clearing a new growing space of weeds. Knock weeds down flat and cover with newspapers, cardboard or old carpet (don't use carpet with a rubber underlay). Make sure there are no gaps and plenty of overlap between pieces so that weeds cannot zig-zag between them.

Peat is an endangered natural resource, often used as mulch or potting compost. You can use coir or leaf mould instead.

Permaculture

The word permaculture comes from 'permanent agriculture' and is a garden design system that involves more than just growing food. Organic growing is a component of a permaculture system. The aim is to produce a sustainable environment based on natural cycles, where each element of the design contributes to the whole system, rather than having just one function. Permaculture encourages diversity of species, recycling and efficient use of space and materials. For more information see our website [contacts page](#).



Tearing up egg boxes helps them break down more quickly

Things you can make

Liquid plant food

Half fill a container with nettles or comfrey leaves and top it up with water. Cover it and leave it for about one month, or until the leaves have broken down into a dark mess. Dilute one part of the liquid with three parts water before using it. Comfrey liquid plant food is high in potassium and nitrogen and has all the nutrients that are in a shop-bought tomato feed.

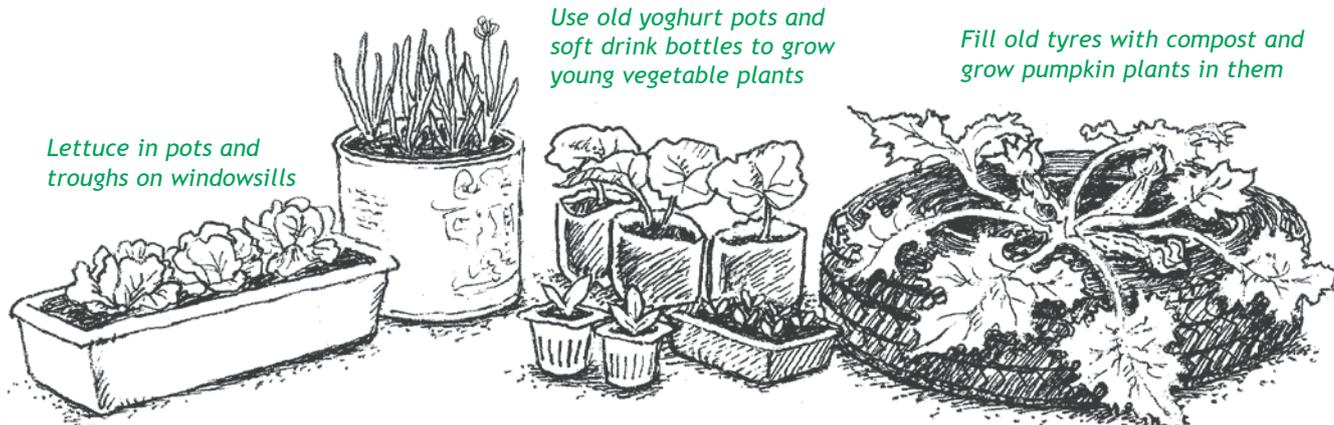
Seed trays and planting pots

Collect plastic trays from supermarket fruit and vegetables to use as seed trays. Plant up young plants in cardboard toilet roll tubes and stack these in the trays. Cut off the bottoms of plastic drinks bottles and use these as planting pots. You can use clear plastic bottles as miniature greenhouses for tender plants such as chillies or aubergines.

Good companions

Companion planting means grouping plants together to benefit each other. Marigolds, fennel and nasturtiums are companion plants which encourage ladybirds and hoverflies (both aphid-eating insects) to a garden. Onions, chives and garlic protect against plant diseases and pests, but they can also suppress plant growth. Sweetcorn and beans are good companions; sweetcorn provides beans with tall stalks to grow up.

For more information contact Garden Organic (previously HDRA), see our website [contacts page](#).



Lettuce in pots and troughs on windowsills

Use old yogurt pots and soft drink bottles to grow young vegetable plants

Fill old tyres with compost and grow pumpkin plants in them

Encouraging wildlife

Over time an organic garden develops a balance of wildlife which helps to control pests. You can make wildlife welcome by providing food and shelter.

Bees and butterflies pollinate flowers so that plants produce fruit. Buddleia, rosemary and marigolds will draw them into your growing space.

Birds add manure to the garden and eat a variety of pests including leatherjackets, greenfly and snails. Leave seed heads in the winter for birds to feed on.

Hoverflies like bright, shallow flowers to feed on, such as convulvulus and marigolds. They eat large quantities of greenfly and their eggs.

Frogs and toads eat slugs and snails. They like cool damp places. Any shady place can be a home for frogs and toads. A small pond will encourage them to stay and breed.

Hedgehogs eat millipedes, cutworms and slugs, among other pests. If you are lucky enough to have a hedgehog living nearby, a small dish of cat food left out at night will encourage it to stay.

Common weeds

Weeds are only plants growing in the wrong place - or those that you haven't yet found a use for. They often indicate fertile soil and can provide an important source of food for garden friends. For example as ladybirds emerge from hibernation they feast on early nettle aphids, so a patch of nettles in your growing space is a good thing. Some weeds do need controlling, and even if you exclude them with a thick mulch, there will always be some weeds to get rid of. Here are a few common ones:

Deep rooted weeds such as **dandelions**, **dock** and **thistles** will need to be dug out to prevent them from regrowing.

Ground elder is a common weed whose brittle roots spread quickly, particularly if they are chopped up by a rotovator. The only sure way to deal with it is by carefully digging up the roots, however, it is also edible, along with other native plants, **chickweed** and **salad burnett**. By identifying your weeds you may find other uses for them as salad vegetables.

Horsetail is an 'indicator plant'. It shows that the soil is poorly drained. As well as weeding, add organic matter and improve drainage to prevent regrowth. It is poisonous.

Useful contacts

For an up-to-date listing of useful contacts visit our website at www.wen.org.uk/local_food.

Further reading

Feeding The Soil The Organic Way
(HDRA/Garden Organic)

Gardening for Wildlife
Ron Wilson (Permanent Publications)

Permaculture in a Nutshell
Patrick Whitefield (Permanent Pubs)

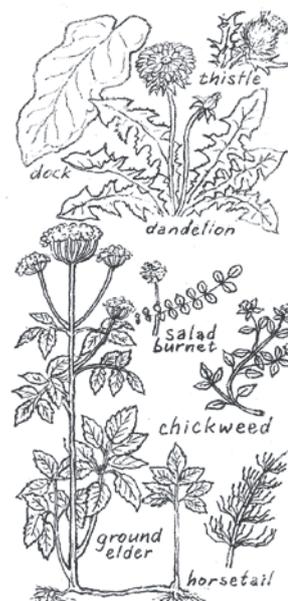
Weeds: How to Control and Love Them
Jo Readman (HDRA/Garden Organic)

Creative Vegetable Gardening
Joy Larkom (Mitchel Beazley)

Organic Gardening
Lawrence D. Hills (Penguin)

The Permaculture Garden
Graham Bell (HarperCollins)

Grow Your Own Chinese Vegetables
Geri Harrington (Garden Ways Publishing)



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About WEN

Women's Environmental Network is a registered charity educating, informing and empowering women and men who care about the environment. It researches and campaigns on environmental and health issues from a female perspective.

Individual membership (women & men)

£20 ordinary

£12 unwaged

£40 supporting

Affiliate membership (organisations)

£35-150 depending on size.

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