Simple Organic Vegetable and Herb Gardening

Made Easy

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Our ebook is presented to you so we can share with you the way we prepare our own garden based on our own experiences and the methods we use to grow our own food. While every effort has been made by the authors to present accurate and up to date information within this document, new information is always coming to hand. Therefore we the authors reserve the right to update or change the contents and information as any changes are required.

We strongly advise everyone to do their own research into all aspects of mulch gardening. We the authors take no responsibility for any errors or discrepancies in this document or any actions taken by anyone whether monetary, legal or otherwise. It is the readers sole responsibility to seek additional information and satisfy themselves on the appropriate methods for their own garden. Reader's results will vary according to their skill levels and individual perception of the contents.

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Introduction

Creating your own Organic Home Vegetable Garden using natural methods is not only logical and easy it provides you with an abundance of inexpensive, healthy, tasty nutrient rich herbs fruit and vegetables.

Nature has shown us how to naturally grow all we need without any digging, plowing, hoeing, weeding or extensive watering of the soil to produce crops free of any chemicals and artificial fertilizers on an ongoing sustainable basis. In fact the least amount of disturbance to the soil the

better, as doing so is detrimental to the micro-organisms that live in healthy living soil destroying their natural delicate balance, disrupting the food chain and promoting erosion, weed growth, pests and disease. For generations people have worked very hard for long hours breaking up digging, plowing and hoeing the land in the mistaken belief they can do it better than nature. Land that for thousands if not millions of years was fertile and productive has been turned into virtual desert. By adding chemical fertilizers and the use of fungicides and pesticides that kill off many of the micro-organisms that convert organic matter into healthy soil, not returning organic matter to the land as well as plowing and extensive irrigating, most commercial farm land, many millions of hectors of land has been reduced to a bare and baron state that is only able to grow produce if fed more chemicals with extensive labor costs and a very limited future. The produce coming from many of these factory farms looks good but is lacking in many beneficial compounds, lacking flavor and many of its potential nourishing properties.

If you look under the trees in any forest you will find there are virtually no weeds, just layers of decomposing leaves rotting branches and other debris that have fallen from the trees. Nature is returning the nutrients needed back to the soil. If you were to dig into this you would find a moist environment hosting a multitude of insects, fungi and other organisms living and working hard with the result that all this natural material is broken down into extremely rich soil, a whole complete eco system that is perfect for growing just about anything.

No matter what type of soil you have from rich top soil to barren eroded areas, clay soils or just sand or gravel it can easily be turned into a natural healthy productive garden with a minimum amount of effort, by simply applying a covering of mulch made from grinding or shredding all manner of garden and organic wastes, made up of leaves branches and trimmings, from very fine to medium large wood chips. (It is always best if possible to prune or cut vegetation before any seeds or fruit have matured so they will not germinate if using it to make mulch). After a few months nature will reduce this mulch cover with the help of oxygen from the air a little water from rain, (or an initial light sprinkling by a garden hose to assist in keeping it moist for the first month or so) plus a multitude of insects, fungi and microbes into a wonderful growing environment. The soil under the mulch will benefit as the micro-organisms in the mulch enter the soil and revitalize it. The mulch will help to retain moisture and earth worms and insects that are attracted to it because it is a major food supply for them, will break up the soil as will any of the

roots of the crops you plant while they are growing through it, seeking the minerals and nutrients that are available there.

Chapter 1 Planning your Garden and Choosing Plants

When planning your garden several factors should be taken into account, the most important being climate, sunshine and rain fall, other considerations are the amount of time you have to devote to looking after your garden, the space or area you have to accommodate your garden, the types of produce you wish to grow and the number of people you want to feed. If space is limited or at a premium, then choosing plants that you use regularly that are quick growing and produce a relatively high yield is the best option. Tomatoes, Cucumber, Courgettes, Melons and Squash, Peas and Beans, Salad Greens like Sweet Potato Tops, Kang Kong (Water Spinach) plus a whole variety of Herbs etc can all be grown relatively quickly in your garden, pots or hanging baskets with their vines being trained to grow on trellises fences or walls. Different varieties of Lettuce, Pak Choy, Sliver Beet, Cabbage, Kale and spinach are all fast growing and take up limited space, they can be grown together in tubs, trays pots, hanging baskets or in your garden. Spring Onions, Garlic, Ginger and Turmeric etc grow well in pots hanging baskets or your garden and can be harvested as needed. Asparagus can be grown in your garden or a large pot 3 ft by 3 ft and if properly looked after can live for 15 years or more providing a multitude of spears every season. A small herb garden in a pot or arranged in a hanging basket can provide a variety of herbs year round.

Depending on where you live, you will always have a good choice of what you can grow in your garden or area, there are always lots of different varieties of plants that will thrive in any given environment, in a garden, large or small, inside or outside, on a deck, a rooftop, in baskets, hanging or free standing in pots or tubs. There are also some types of plants that are just not suitable to grow because of your climate, available space or other factors. The temperature in your area is a major factor which can influence plants ability to survive and grow, it can also act as a trigger to start some seeds to germinate or produce flowers. Some plants require cool conditions for their seeds to germinate, others need a warm environment. The design of your garden depends on your area or available space, how much sun and rain you can expect and the wind conditions, how much time you have to devote to your garden etc, all these things play

important roles in deciding what plants are best suited and how you should go about growing them.

Take advantage of the existing trees large rocks and contours if any of your land, many plants like to climb and using existing feature can save a lot of unnecessary work. Consider the rainfall and any runoff, as some plants love wet conditions while others demand dryer soils. Consider how many people you wish to feed or supply from your garden and plant accordingly. It is often better to start with a small area and do it properly and then once you have an area established increasing it is very easy. Some crops are high maintenance while others require very little effort. Many plants varieties such as tomatoes, cucumbers peas and beans like to grow off the ground on stakes, frames, trellis or wires; others are more suited to standing alone, living under ground or close to or on the surface. Some vegetables are annual, only living for a season, others are biennial, they flower and produce flowers and seeds in their second year or season and some can last for 15 years or more. Lettuces and leafy herbs like basil generally like to have full sunshine, others thrive in partial shade.

Pests and disease are usually a problem in standard gardens that use commercial fertilizers and standard methods but most of these things do not worry a well planed organic mulch garden, because healthy natural plants can provide protection to themselves and other plants. Arranging your plants to take advantage of their natural properties to help repel pests, attract beneficial insects and stop diseases spreading as well as supporting each other because of the different nutrients they use or provide. One of the most effective methods of controlling pests is companion planting. Planting in long straight rows of the same vegetable varieties encourages pests and disease and also reduces individual plants abilities to get the best from your garden.

Nature does not dig, weed, plow or irrigate land but uses natural forces and conditions to grow, maintain and encourage all the many thousands of plants everywhere that have evolved and adapted to survive the differing elements they encounter. A successful low maintenance and productive garden whether it’s for growing fruit and vegetables for food or decorative plants such as flowers can be made by adapting natural processes and methods in your own garden.

If you wish to sterilize the soil because you suspect it may be harboring pests, diseases, weeds and seeds, the easiest time to do this is before you put down mulch or start a new garden. An existing garden that is struggling to survive or taking lots of time and effort to maintain can

easily be transformed into a virtually maintenance free garden by applying woodchip mulch and using the methods outlined in this book.

It's always a good idea to sterilize garden soil before planting to ensure the most optimal growth and health of your garden and its plants. Solarization is a method of using heat from the sun to kill disease carrying organisms that can cause plant problems like verticillium wilt, root rot, damping off and others, as well as to eradicate pests and seeds that could be living in the soil. In order for your garden to have the full benefit of solarization, the soil needs to reach a temperature of 114 degrees F (46 degrees C) for at least four to six weeks.

To Solarize your Soil

First clear the area of any vegetation that will not easily flatten and any rocks and inorganic matter. Then give it a good soaking so that the top foot (30cm) or so is moist and cover the whole area with clear plastic sheeting, held down with rocks, bricks or anything to stop it blowing away. Some people opt for black plastic sheeting but we found that it was not as effective. I have heard that using 1 sheet of clear plastic on the ground with another sheet held a few inches above it can reduce the time it takes for the soil to be solarized because it increases the heating effect but we have not tried doing this as we found the 1 sheet method adequate.

The plastic sheets must be kept flat to the ground. In hot areas with lots of sun leave the plastic sheet in place for 4 weeks. In colder areas it may need to be left for 8 to 12 weeks. But check the soil to make sure it is still moist every week to insure the sanitizing heat penetrates the soil.

Soil for use in seedling and potting mixes can also be solarized in the same way, spread the soil out to a depth of about 4 inches (10cm) on a plastic sheet, then add enough water so it is completely moist and place another clear plastic sheet on top of it weighted down to secure it and then leave it for 4 to 12 weeks. A quicker method is to bake it in your oven, spread the soil into baking dishes so it is about 4 inches (10cm) thick and bake it @ 180-200 F. (82-93 C.) for at least 30 minutes.

A Mini Insectary is very good idea to help with the control of pests and also increase the visual appearance of your garden. A mini insectary is an area or areas of flowering or aromatic plants designed to attract and harbor beneficial insects. These 'good' insects prey on many common garden insect pests, and offer the gardener a safer, natural alternative to pesticides.

A Banana circle is a good way to start a garden in the tropics or anywhere bananas will grow (we grew bananas in Auckland New Zealand 40 years ago, our plants only produced a few bananas but we felt it was worth the effort), especially if your limited with space or want several separate garden plots. Plant your banana seedlings in a 15 to 25 ft diameter circle and place your mulch around the seedlings and covering the area inside the circle they form. Bananas are quick growing and produce a large amount of trash that can be chopped up and used as mulch or compost, once you have harvested your bananas, the plant should be cut down to about a foot from ground level, then more shoots will grow from this stump to form new plants. Bananas provide excellent protection from heat and drought and a natural barrier for your garden.

Deciding on whether to plant seeds, cuttings or purchase seedling is a matter of not only convenience but also of the quality of the plants, fruit and vegetables they will produce. Some vegetables like bok choy and lettuce grow very quickly from seeds, a matter of a few weeks, while other can take several months to mature. Fruit trees can take anywhere from 4 to 15 years to bear fruit depending on the type of tree. Using seeds from reputable organic sources is often the best way to go, seeds harvested from plants you have grown is also a good option, as long as steps to stop cross-pollination have been taken. Many plants can be cross-pollinated by wind or insects and quite often the resulting seeds will not grow plants or fruit anything like what you expect. Seeds from shop brought fruit are usually hybrid which are almost certain to produce plants and fruit that are very different from the fruit you took them from. Hybrid plants are grown from crossing different varieties of the same type of plants to produce a plant with characteristics that are required such as size, color and insect resistance. Another reason to grow from seeds is you can get a much larger variety and variations of the same types of plants than usually found in nurseries. Planting cuttings is a sure way to guarantee that you will get fruit and vegetables that are the same as the parent plant and often much quicker to grow than seeds.

The growing season in your area is a major factor that should be taken into account when making choices whether stating from seeds or seedlings. If you are able to start seeds indoors during colder months, then replant or moving them outside when conditions are right, this will give a larger range of options on the types of plants you can grow in places where the growing season is short. Tomatoes, peppers and eggplant are often either started indoors or many gardeners opt to purchase organic seedlings from a nursery or garden center because of the length of time they take to grow, tomatoes for example grown from seeds need about 4 to 5 months to produce fruit.

Quick growing crops, such as lettuce, beans, peas and summer squash, often don't benefit from being started indoors as seedlings, their seeds planted directly in the garden will quickly catch up to these transplants in a standard garden. In a mulch garden when the seeds are germinated and grown into seedlings in leaf pots there is no disturbance to the seedlings when the pots are planted they just keep growing with a head start, allowing you to extend your growing season or having successive crops because you can have more seedlings growing ready to plant as you harvest.

With a mulch garden for the first season or until the woodchips have broken down sufficiently it is a good idea to plant all seeds cuttings or seedlings in leaf pots filled with homemade seedling mix first as it takes time for the mulch to break down, an alternative method is to make a small trench or hole with your rake and fill it with homemade seedling mix when planting directly into your mulch garden to give them the best chance of survival. After the first year this will not be a concern as the mulch garden will have produced a wonderful growing environment for the plants, so seeds, cuttings or seedling can be planted straight into your mulch garden.

Once you have decided on the size and shape of your garden, as well as the types of plants you would like in your garden it is time to begin planning construction.

Chapter 2 Preparing your Garden Bed

Whether you have plenty of room for your garden or only a few square meters to use, an almost maintenance free garden can be made just about anywhere there is a few hours of sunshine on most days.

With good soil the time it takes to condition it will be minimal about 3 to 6 months, but with ground where the top soil has been eroded away, drained of most nutrients by intensive agriculture, is mainly sand or hard clay type areas it can take a little longer, 6 to 12 months to vitalize the soil but the mulch will provide a good growing environment on top until this happens.

The first step is to look at your soil type and what materials are available for making a mulch cover. Many people dig, hoe or plough the area, this is not a good practice as it harms, disturbs and can kill many of the good organisms living there and any vegetation will once buried rot

using up valuable nitrogen and other minerals depriving the soil and your plants, instead of feeding the many billions of organisms that combine together to produce healthy productive soil.

The purpose of the mulch cover is to provide a living environment for the microbes insects, fungi and other micro-organisms to live, breed and feed, turning it into a rich nourishing bed for your plants to grow in with the roots from the plants you establish breaking up the underlying soil allowing the expansion of this eco-system downwards. This mulch cover will retain moisture from rain and absorb moisture from the air, provide an insulating blanket to protect all the life forms living in it from heat fluctuations as well as giving protection to the soil underneath and the developing beneficial life forms there. Many nutrients from, the mulch will leach thorough to enrich the soil and it will stop 90% of future weeds developing, it is also wind and erosion resistant.

The best option for mulch is made up of assorted sized wood chips from shredded trees and other vegetation, the woodchips or mulch should contain leaves twigs, small and larger branches. Shredded vegetation is often obtainable free from local councils. If this is not available any vegetable matter can be used, you can make up your own mulch from leaves mixed with straw, lawn clippings, a small amount of organic wheat or rice husk, untreated saw dust, chopped up seaweed, kitchen vegetable waste or any other type of organic matter that will slowly decompose and breakdown. It is best to have a range of different sized pieces in the mulch and especially if using grass lawn clippings or saw dust, it must be well mixed so they do not clump together.

If the area you have chosen for your garden has healthy lawn, grass or small plant cover then lay a blanket made up of sheets of flat cardboard (flattened corrugated cardboard boxes without glossy print, plastic tape etc) or several layers of banana leaves or similar down first to form a barrier that the grass will not grow through. The grass under this will just die and break down with the cardboard, adding nutritional value to your garden. If you chose to solarize the area first then there is no need to place a biodegradable barrier first.

Remove any vegetation that cannot be flattened and covered. If the area has fruit bearing or other trees you wish to keep they can be pruned and left as they can benefit your garden. If the area is completely bare, you can put a few inches of clean topsoil down first but this is not necessary. Cover the area with at least 12 inches 30cm (or more if you have enough wood chips) of wood chips or homemade mulch, spread it evenly with a garden rake without compacting or digging it

in at all. If you dig in the mulch it will only rot over time using huge amounts of nitrogen and other essential nutrients. It is important for the air to be able to flow though the mulch so it will sustain the micro-organisms that will break it down into fertile nutrient rich soil. Although it is not necessary decomposed compost or aged natural fertilizers like chicken pig or cattle manure can be mixed into the mulch but you should only use decomposed animal manures from organically raised live stock because any chemicals they have been fed with will be present in their manure and taken up by any vegetables grown using it.

In most towns or large cities there is plenty of shredded vegetation available usually free or it can be obtained very cheaply as most councils and tree pruning companies have a major problem getting rid of it. It is worth getting twice the amount of shredded vegetation as you will need to use to start with if you have the room and just place it in a pile and allow it to weather so you can add it on top of your garden when needed. Usually a new layer can be applied after each crop is harvested or spread around your plants up to just under the first leaves, done yearly or as needed, depending on the depth of the first layer. Some gardeners opt for laying 3 ft or more of mulch at the start, and then there is no need to add extra for years. Just rake any additional mulch with added compost if desired directly on top of the old mulch. This can be spread up to just below the first leaves of almost all plants, as long as it is not compacted, each addition will improve your garden and feed the insects and microbes already present there.

The area we used for our garden had been extensively cultivated for generations and had not had any or only very small amounts of nutrients returned to the soil, so it was severely depleted and quite unproductive with almost all the leaves and plant debris from the crops grown there raked up and burnt.

The land had knee high weed and scattered grasses with lots of rubbish and small trees starting to grow. The small trees we pulled up and also removed all the non-organic rubbish, doing this helped to flatten the grass and weeds. Then we opted to solarize the area for 3 months which killed any pests and diseases that may have been living in the soil, as well as all the grass and other weeds growing there. Then we spread about 20 truckloads of shredded trees from our local council (mulch), thoroughly mixed with some homemade compost comprising of decomposed kitchen scraps, shredded paper, tea leaves, coffee grounds, egg shells and any other organic matter we could find, seaweed gathered from local beaches (this we spread out and allowed it to

weather and dry before chopping it finely so as to easily be mixed in with the mulch), evenly over the area to about 1 ft deep and ordered another 20 truckloads of mulch which we just spread out a bit and left it to weather.

After 3 months the wood chips had begun to break down and insects and other organisms had moved in. Down one side of the garden we raked a trench in the mulch about a foot wide and down to the topsoil, in this we carefully spread out along the length, 5kg of live earth worms and a few wheelbarrows of well decomposed compost. Then gently and carefully raked the mulch back over the worms adding another foot of mulch on top and then started to raise our seedlings in our homemade leaf pots.

Chapter 3 Homemade Seedling and Potting Mixes

Making homemade seedling and potting mixes is very cost effective and you do know what you're getting, much recent publicity has highlighted the fact that almost all major brands of seedling and potting mixes are less than what they claim to be and very expensive, especially those clamming to be organic.

A seedling mix needs to have several properties, it needs to contain nutrients to feed the seedlings or cuttings, to hold moisture and allow air to freely flow through it so the seeds can germinate and grow, as well it needs to be soft enough for fine new roots to be able to grow freely but support them, it is usually not intended for long term plant growth.

Potting mixtures are very similar to seedling mixture but tend to be made of coarser materials and they are intended for long term plant growth so have more nutrients added.

Our Homemade Seedling and Potting Mix (we just use the same mixture) is made from 40% of our own solarized garden soil, 10%, by volume of washed coarse river sand and 50% of screened aged compost/soil from our chicken run (or use homemade compost). We usually mix it as needed in a wheel barrow and rake any excess leftover onto the mulch on our garden bed.

Lately we have stopped making compost in our compost bin and instead throw all our kitchen scraps and garden waste in our chicken run, the chickens do the job perfectly, they are the best compost/fertilizer machines anywhere, plus we get the benefit of organic eggs and fresh meat. If you do not have room for a chicken run or prefer make your own compost see chapter 10

Commercial seedling and potting mixtures are usually of dubious quality and ingredients; they often include some of the following ingredients.

Top or garden soil this adds density and volume to mixes but care has to be taken in choosing where to get if from as a lot of soil contains pesticides, chemical fertilizer residues or other environmental pollutants. The soil needs to be sterilized before use, there are several methods commonly used to do this Solarize is a method where the top or garden soil is spread out to about 4 to 6 inches and its covered with clear plastic sheeting and left for 4 to 12 weeks so the sun can heat it and sterilize it. Commercial soils are often chemically sterilized.

Compost if made properly and full decomposed is an ideal additive to seedling and potting mixes providing a soft medium for tender roots to grow without smothering. It is probably the most important ingredient in any homemade soil mixture; it holds moisture and is porous enough to allow the free flowing of air (oxygen). It also provides an easily available supply of nutrients for the seedlings once they need it. Compost adds nutrients and billions of beneficial microbes which help to keep bad and destructive bacteria in check. It should be totally decomposed and screened to a uniform size. This is usually left out of commercial mixes. How to produce your own compost and compost tea are in chapter 10

Coarse Clean River Sand improves drainage and adds physical support to seedlings and growing plants as well as adding weight to the mix.

Peat Moss is often used in commercial soil mixtures, it is inexpensive and easily obtainable, holds water well and is used to add bulk to soil mixtures unfortunately it usually has wetting agents added to it so is not suitable for use in organic farming. Its other drawback is you have to add limestone to balance its pH levels.

Coconut fiber or Coir fiber is often used in place of peat moss it has similar qualities to peat moss, has more nutrients and takes a lot longer to breakdown. Its pH level is compatible with soil mixtures. This is often used in organic mixes.

Composted Bark is often added to soil mixtures, its main advantages are it helps with air circulation and encourages water to travel around within the mix. Its main disadvantages are it tends to take a large amount of nitrogen and other minerals from the mix while it breaks down and it needs limestone to balance its pH levels.

Raw Untreated Sawdust is not recommended to use in seedling or potting mixture because it depletes the mixture of many minerals while breaking down, although when composted or decomposed it has many nutritional benefits.

Perlite is heated and expanded volcanic rock, this process causes it to become very light and allows it to hold almost 4 times its weight in water, it improves drainage and is often used in place of sand.

Vermiculite is a mined mineral that is conditioned by heating until it expands into light particles; it is used to increase the porosity of soil mixtures. It also adds calcium and magnesium to the soil and increases the water-holding capacity. Its main drawback is it contains natural asbestos; the EPA recommends growers use other products like composted sawdust, peat or perlite instead.

Limestone or Calcium Carbonate is used to adjust the pH of soil mixtures that contain acidic ingredients.

Fertilizers are used in soil mixtures when they do not contain compost. Most commercial soil mixtures contain fertilizers derived from chemicals, mined minerals, animal byproducts and food manufacturing wastes from large scale factory farm produced manures which have heavy concentrations of the compounds and chemicals used in those operations.

Bio char is made by burning organic materials usually wood and weeds in a low oxygen environment etc to produce charcoal, it has had a lot of hype about it being the ultimate way to transform low grade soils into high quality soils in an environmentally sound way, but this is totally untrue. The early reports on the biochar initiative were inspired by the discovery of 'terra preta' (black earth) in the Amazon Basin, at sites of pre-Columbian settlements (between 450BC and 950AD), made by charcoal, bone, and manure being adding to the soil over many thousands of years The theory was based on assumption not scientific facts. It is true that those areas of terra preta are incredibly fertile, but they got that way by being built up slowly over 1000 to 2500 years of human habitation and then had another 1000 years for Mother Nature to work on them to turn them into what they are today. The idea of throwing huge amounts of fresh charcoal into poor quality soil to instantly transform into rich soil makes no sense at all. The only really successful experiments doing this also had chemical fertilizers added; these are not used in organic farming and destroy many of the beneficial microorganisms and life forms we are trying

to encourage. Burning to produce carbon or biochar uses vast amounts of oxygen depleting the world's available oxygen reserves and leaves this charcoal in a state of being oxygen negative. It is true that biochar by its self can provide a ready home for fungi and other micro-organisms to live and breed as well as helping to break up the soil, making it more porous so it can retain moisture and air over time. This is done better naturally by composting organic materials so they are broken down by living organisms that turn it into compounds plants can readily absorb and use as well as providing all the benefits of biochar without depleting oxygen and contributing to co2 emissions to the same extent. Therefore biochar should not be made and it should be left out of your soil and soil mixtures. A small amount of wood ash from burning organic matter that is not suitable for composting ie untreated hard woods that cannot be chipped for mulch, weeds or other plants that contain seeds or fruit are beneficial and useful if mixed into your mulch garden to add minerals.

Most commercial soil mixtures have a limited useful shelf life so include chemicals to prolong their use by dates making them unsuitable for organic gardening.

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Everyone's bodies and systems are different and peoples choices in foods vary considerably, there is not one herb spice or compound that will be a "miracle cure" for arthritis but there are many compounds and substances that are contained in natural foods that when taken in combination with other natural foods can provide our bodies with the necessary nutrients and compounds "mother nature:" has provided for us. Eliminating unnatural compounds and substances that are added to many processed foods which affect all peoples systems and reduce