

GROWING FRUIT ORGANICALLY

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It is interesting to note that the 21st Century has seen more and more gardeners growing their plants organically and this is being reflected commercially with a considerable number of growers doing likewise. But why is this happening? Is it just a modern fad or are the public generally becoming more concerned about the number of chemicals that are being used in the food they are going to eat? I contend that the latter is the case and I also believe that there will be an increasing interest in growing this way.

Unfortunately the very term “organic growing” is enough to prompt a vigorous debate in the horticultural world and the purpose of this article is not to enliven this debate but to offer some practical advice on the merits of growing fruit in the allotment and garden organically and ways and means of doing it. Whilst, of course, I am writing about growing fruit organically all of the points discussed apply equally to everything else growing in the garden.

I cannot pretend that growing organically is easy or will produce instant results but I can assure you that you can harvest your crops at any time and feel safe to eat them without ingesting any chemical residue at the same time. Incidentally providing that you grow fruit which is known not to be disease prone there is absolutely no reason why your fruit will grow poorly or be inedible. I grow all of my fruit organically yet can stage a collection in the Westminster Halls and receive a Gold Medal! In any case I have a young son who enjoys being in the garden and I want to be absolutely certain that everything in the garden is free from chemicals.

So how is it done? I believe that this can be considered in four stages - good preparation of the ground into which the fruit is to be planted, a careful selection of the varieties to grow, keeping the fruit healthy and an early identification of any pest or disease problems.

The ground in which fruit is to be planted must be contemplated carefully. It is essential to ensure that the site is cleared of all weeds and any other growth, there is good drainage and that plenty of organic matter is worked into the planting area if the soil is very heavy or very light; however do not use too much organic matter before planting gooseberries, currants or strawberries or too much leafy growth will be produced. When planting work into the soil a handful of blood, fish and bone which will act as a slow release fertiliser. If planting into pots use a soil based compost made by yourself comprising well sieved garden soil mixed in equal parts with leafmould and with a handful of blood, fish and bone added. By the way never replant fruit trees or bushes on the same site that they were removed from as specific plant diseases can build up in the soil and this can cause very poor or minimal growth..

The selection of suitable varieties to grow is critical to growing organically - there is absolutely no point in growing varieties which are susceptible to disease as these are often hard to grow even with a major drenching of chemicals! Fortunately recent fruit breeding has produced a number of reliable and disease resistant plants and trees which has meant that the days of apple trees like Cox's Orange Pippin which spend most of their life covered with mildew, scab and goodness knows what no longer need be grown. There are plenty of modern apples (even Cox-like apples) such as Fiesta which grow easily and are relatively disease free. There are modern varieties of gooseberry which are mildew resistant and easy to grow. A list of these varieties appears at the end. As a matter of interest ignore those pundits who suggest that it is the best flavoured fruits that cannot be grown organically - many of the fruits that the gardener can grow well organically are of the very highest quality.

Having decided which varieties to grow the next step is buying your fruit. The only way to ensure that you plant good disease free fruit plants or trees (particularly with soft fruit such as raspberries and strawberries) is to buy them from a reputable nursery. This is absolutely critical

because if you plant a diseased or poor plant or tree it will probably never recover and not last very long let alone give you a good crop of fruit. Do not be tempted to buy a cheap offering from a car boot sale or your local greengrocer as economy of this nature will rarely pay dividends.

Perhaps the most important factor in growing fruit organically is the ability to keeping it growing well and in a healthy condition. The removal of weeds is important as they can starve the plants of nutrients and water and harbour pests and diseases. Remove all weeds in early spring and as soon as the soil begins to warm in May apply a mulch which can be of newspaper, plastic sheet, straw or chipped bark which will have the added benefit of conserving moisture. Ensure that your fruit is kept well watered in dry weather; although established trees will be able to stand some drought newly established trees and soft fruit plants will need plenty of water to grow.

Many "experts" consider that plants and trees planted in well prepared soil should not need feeding as a matter of routine. Nevertheless I do believe in regular feeding to keep plants and trees growing well and producing good crops and to this end I apply a feed of blood, fish and bone at the start of each growing season. Incidentally, never overfeed your fruit because this can in itself cause the plants to succumb to disease.

One of the most important assets that gardeners have to help them look after their plants and trees is nature itself but this will only be possible if it is left undamaged and allowed to reach a balance. There are many beneficial insects, such as ground beetles, lacewings, hoverflies and ladybirds that can keep pests under control but this will not be possible if they have been destroyed by winter washes and chemical sprays. Grow plants such as buddleia and calendula which will attract hoverflies and lacewings into the garden and provide winter accommodation for hibernating lacewings in the form of straw filled boxes with openings in the front. Try and encourage birds, blue tits in particular, to eat overwintering pests by hanging bird feeders amongst the fruit trees. Amazingly earwigs, which are despised by most gardeners - probably for their fearsome look - can be very useful in that they will eat aphids, codling moth eggs and the red spider mite. It is unlikely that these insects will cause little more than minimal damage, if any, and this seems a bargain when compared to the use of harmful chemicals.

As I mentioned earlier growing organically is not easy and it is perhaps in the control of pests and diseases that this becomes most apparent. Nevertheless, the best form of control is easy - and that is to dissuade pests and prevent diseases by looking after your fruit and conditions that encourage them must be avoided. Garden hygiene is absolutely critical and it can really make the difference in helping to win the organic battle. Good garden hygiene includes ensuring that fallen and decaying leaves and fallen or damaged fruit are removed. Who knows what can be hiding under a pile of leaves or what fungus spores decaying leaves and damaged fruit are carrying? For example, apple scab overwinters on fallen leaves, codling moth caterpillars live in fallen apples and pear midge grubs live in fallen fruitlets.

When it comes to the successful management of pests and diseases in the organic garden vigilance is an important aspect of good control as early notice of visible pests and diseases can often stop them spreading. Aphids - whatever colour they may be (and including woolly aphids), can be wiped off by hand or washed off by a jet of water, caterpillars eating away at leaves, most commonly gooseberries and redcurrants, can be picked off by hand and the same applies to slugs and snails attacking strawberries. Pear midge causes the small black pear fruitlets which eventually fall off the tree - these should be removed as soon as they are noticed along with any that are on the ground and should be destroyed. The round, fat buds found on blackcurrants is caused by the blackcurrant big bud mite and should be picked off and destroyed.

There are other pests which can be controlled without the use of chemicals. Codling moth which burrows into apples can be controlled with the use of pheromone traps as can the plum tree fruit moth. These traps are widely available. Winter moths climb trees in late autumn in order to lay their eggs; these can be simply controlled by the use of paper impregnated with grease placed around the tree trunk or a layer of grease applied directly to the trunk itself.

Some fruit pests can be controlled by the use of predators. The two spotted spider mite which can be a troublesome pest of strawberries, raspberries and peaches can be controlled by the predator *phytoseiulus persimilis* and more may become available in the future to control other troublesome pests.

Diseases often only affect parts of a fruit tree or bush and the spread of this disease can, in many cases, be controlled by cutting or removing out the affected parts. Dieback can affect many plants, particularly currants, gooseberries and plums which can cause whole branches to die. Cut back to healthy wood as soon as the dieback is noticed and destroy the diseased wood. Shoots and branches can become damaged by weather, weight of fruit or birds sitting on them! As soon as this damage is noticed the shoot or branch should be cut back to undamaged wood to ensure that disease cannot enter - this is particularly important on the stone fruits.

Mildew in apples and gooseberries usually affects blossom and young shoots - cut off the affected shoots and blossoms and destroy as soon as possible. Mouldy fruits and rotten fruits affect all fruit plants and trees and should be removed as soon as possible or the disease will quickly spread. Peach leaf curl can be minimised by covering fan trained peach and nectarine trees in December with a polythene structure to prevent the shoots getting wet and allowing the fungus to develop. The covers can be removed in May and a byproduct of this is that the microclimate under the polythene will have encouraged a good fruit set.

Although it is best for nature to strike a balance there are occasions when pests can become a bigger problem particularly if aphid and caterpillar populations build up too quickly. In the case of aphids insecticidal soap applications can be sprayed onto dense populations although I would encourage the hose blast first! Where caterpillars are denuding redcurrant and gooseberry plants and it is impossible to pick them all off by hand Derris can be used sparingly but keep well away from bees and beneficial insects.

So how about having a go at growing your fruit (and everything else in the garden) organically? Nothing that I have described above is rocket science and anyone can therefore manage it. However, patience is a prerequisite as you will not change everything overnight. Do not be disheartened if your fruit suffers a little in your first organic growing season as it will take a year or two for the natural balance to occur; you will have to expect the odd blemish on your fruit but this will not be harmful. Just remember that your fruit will contain no applied chemicals and the environment of your garden contains a healthy insect population and surely that will make the sacrifice well worthwhile.

Varieties Suitable for Organic Growing

In my experience the following are quality fruits that show a good resistance to diseases:

Apples

Chivers Delight (dessert)

Discovery (dessert)

Jester (dessert)

Jubile (dessert)

Laxton's Fortune (dessert)

Lord Lambourne (dessert)
Red Devil (dessert)
Sunset (dessert)
Edward V11 (culinary)
Grenadier (culinary)
Howgate Wonder (culinary)
Lane's Prince Albert (culinary)
Lord Derby (culinary)

Blackcurrants

Ben Connan
Ben Sarek

Blackberries

Adrienne
Helen
Oregon Thornless
Silvan

Cherries

Stella

Gooseberries

Greenfinch
Invicta
Pax.

Nectarines

Lord Napier

Peaches

Peregrine
Rochester

Pears

Beurre Hardy
Beurre Superfin
Conference
Concorde
Doyenne du Comice
Merton Pride
Nouveau Poiteau

Plums, Gages and Damsons

Czar (culinary)
Denniston's Superb (Imperial Gage) (dessert)
Marjorie's Seedling (dual purpose)
Opal (dessert)
Oullin's Golden Gage (dessert)
Victoria (dual purpose)

Raspberries

Autumn Bliss (autumn fruiting)
Glen Ample

Glen Magna
Redsetter

Redcurrants

Junifer
Laxton's No. 1
Red Lake

Strawberries

Florence
Maraline
Rhapsody

Whitecurrants

White Versailles