

Going Organic
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Note: this article was written for the YahooGroup Gardening Organically, and was inspired by a new member quite discouraged by garden pests, ready to give up on organic gardening and go "back to flowers."

Going Organic is much more than just switching from Monsanto-manufactured chemical warfare, to switching to herbal sprays and less-toxic powders. Going organic is an opportunity to RETHINK. It is a journey of REBUILDING with different, yet similar, basic components.

When we build our garden organically, we must leave behind the grow-what-I-wish-and-spray-the-bad-bugs domination mentality. There is a whole ecosystem out there that conventional gardening techniques ignore and motor over (or more literally: defy and chem-spray over!). Going organic is an opportunity to step into that ecosystem and to embrace it, and to nudge it into being useful for your ends, i.e. growing human food.

When I say ecosystem, I mean that we aren't just growing veggies, herbs, flowers, trees. We're also growing soil, beneficial insects, fresh air, wildlife. We must consider these in the full picture of our system.

If we merely reach for a spray (conventional or less-toxic, it doesn't matter) when we see a bug munching our veggies, we are overlooking so many other possibilities! Bill Mollison, a founder of the permaculture theory, is often quoted to the effect of "You don't have a snail problem, you have a duck deficiency." He is saying, increase your duck population and you will have less slugs. He's inviting you to switch perspective: perhaps the solution is not annihilation; perhaps your system needs addition of a missing element.

In conventional gardening, one uses a myriad of sprays and powders; there's a chemical that can be applied to just about every problem. An organic gardener has many tools he/she can use, only a few of which are sprays, and very few of which fit the "applied to" verb form! In fact, we often approach a problem situation from many angles simultaneously. And most of these angles involve shoring up a faltering portion of the overall cycle or system.

You mentioned homemade sprays and powders in your post. Have you looked into beneficial insects, pheromone lures, physical traps, barrier methods? Look up your bugs online and see what might eat them. I often do this by searching Google till I can positively i.d. my bug, getting its scientific name, and then searching for that name plus the word "predator" in Google. I've had lots of success. You can buy many beneficials through catalogs like Gardens Alive and others.

Additionally, many plant disabilities can be attributed to soil deficiencies, like Gloria referenced. Have a soil analysis done. If you are new to the organic world, likely your soil is not in tip top shape. John Jeavons and other sustainability thinkers assert that all gardening begins with building healthy soil. Feed your soil, and it will feed your plants. More than just feeding your soil this season, what can be done to assure that your soil continues to get what it needs on an ongoing basis? Search list archives and learn about mulching, sheet composting, use of legumes, Mycorrhizae and water-wise techniques appropriate to your area.

Do not overlook what veterans have to say about plant rotation. Much of the folk wisdom about plant rotation has to do with the fact that plant diseases can become resident in the soil. The same family of crop grown in the same spot year after year is asking for trouble. Poor soil nutrients can only compound this issue because weakened, undernourished plants are much more susceptible.

Plant selection is also so important! From the outset, select species and varieties that are likely to do well in your specific area. I used the internet heavily when I began (and also used locally written garden books), and still do when I try something new. What does this plant like? Sun/shade/drought/marsh/low nutrients/high humus? What time of year do I plant it? Do others in my area grow it successfully? Pay attention to the plant's origin (example: forest floor) as this indicates what it is genetically programmed to want. Is there a variety of it that is already adapted to my area (example: drought resistant varieties of conventional, previously English, veggies). Is there a variety that is resistant to the plant diseases I am encountering (example: the alphabet soup by each variety of tomato in a given catalog). Seed saving from your successes can also help here, because what did well on YOUR plot last year, might be the best adaptation for your plot this year (and seed saving means you have to select non-hybrid varieties to start out with). Expecting to grow a plant in marginal conditions is asking for a high-maintenance gardening project. Better to select things that are comfy where and how you plan to grow them.

Going organic is a glowing and beckoning invitation to get to know your individual plot of land; to get up close and personal and also to step back and see it in a broader picture. Hello, Garden-Plot, who are you? Like you'd get to know a significant other, get to know your land. Beyond "what zone am I" there are bigger questions, like Am I in a drought area (look at the past 5-10 years, and at climate change forecasts; don't merely look at the past 100 yr history), What is the history of my land (conventional-and-thus-depleted-farmland? topsoil-scalped-for-new-housing development?); Where are my permanent shade zones; What areas of my land won't drain (or conversely don't have irrigation); What critters live here besides me, that I will have to figure out how to cope with ... the list continues.

So organic is much more than leaving behind the toxic chemicals. It includes getting to know your plot of earth and its particular circumstances, and matching this with the needs of the plant you're proposing to grow, and getting to know your local bugs and who eats whom, and getting to know what critters like to live on your property and figuring out how you can coexist with them. And yes, you may learn to cook up a few little herbal brews that might be sprayed as a bandaid once in a while. But sprays and applied-stuff are far from the mainstay of a vital and bountiful organic garden.

This is a lot to think about, and won't really help with your corn plants in May 2004. But it will help you with your overall approach to gardening. Also, it's something that most of us ease into over time, you can't kick yourself for not knowing all, from the very beginning. But, the above is a glimpse of the journey ahead. And, you don't have to give up and go back to flowers!!!!