



# Growing organic

## What's it all about?

### COLIN BARLOW guides you along the organic garden path

TAKE a step back in time and consider the way we used to cultivate the land before the advent of synthetic chemicals such as fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides and fungicides.

Farmers worked with nature to prevent pests and diseases by farming a diverse range of plants and animals (biodiversity), planting and harvesting according to the natural cycle of the seasons, crop rotation and, most importantly, by nurturing the soil. It was all about sustaining the natural ecosystem by caring for the health of the environment.

Organics is simply going back to the more traditional farming methods of yesteryear, while using the modern techniques and scientific research of today to produce fresh, tasty and healthy food from plants that are free from synthetic chemicals and genetic modification.

So where can you learn more about the philosophies and practical techniques of organic growing?

A range of practical ideas is at your fingertips or just a phone call away. From city farms and community gardens to organic grower and permaculture groups, seed-saver networks and biodynamic farming, read on to find out what they are all about.

### Community gardens and city farms

The land for community gardens and city farms is often given to the residents by the local council or authorities to create a functional and productive organic garden.

The opportunity to learn about gardening by sharing experiences and ideas, meet and socially interact with like-minded people, helps to create a sense of community ownership among the residents.

Many of these gardens and farms provide newsletters, seeds and plants for sale and some even have organic produce for sale with regular Saturday-morning markets. If you would like to get involved or see for yourself what it is all about check out these places in Perth from the panel below.

### Organic grower groups

Organic grower groups involve a network of passionate gardeners who regularly meet to discuss ideas, information and swap plants and seeds. Networks exist where both home and commercial gardeners can interact and gain advice on general or specific topics of interest. Many groups have libraries or sell books and organic products. Membership fees may be applicable for access to all articles and information.

### Biodynamics

The foundations of the biodynamic farming method were laid by the Austrian scientist and philosopher Rudolf Steiner in 1924, who described a method of producing a series of biological preparations that would powerfully activate the soil, allow plants to grow to their optimum health and feed naturally from the soil.

This enhanced form of organic gardening was outlined in a series of eight lectures known as the Agriculture Course, which discussed how the health of the plants, animals and soil are related to each another and to the creative forces of the cosmos.



### Where is your local community garden or city farm?

- **City Farm** 182 Brown Street, East Perth. Web: [www.menofthetrees.com.au/cityfarm.html](http://www.menofthetrees.com.au/cityfarm.html) Tel: 9325 7229
- **Fremantle Environmental Resources Network (FERN)** Corner of Montreal Street and High Street, Fremantle. Web: [www.fern.org.au](http://www.fern.org.au) Tel: 0403 815 512 or 9335 1566
- **Naragebup Rockingham Regional Environmental Centre** Safety Bay Road (opposite Lake Richmond), Peron. Web: [www.naragebup.org.au](http://www.naragebup.org.au) Tel: 9591 3077



Pictures: Colin Barlow and Philip Powell

- 1 Raised bed for growing vegetables, as well as aesthetically pleasing, they save your back and keep the dogs off.
- 2 A young vegetable patch at City Farm in East Perth.
- 3 Worms are an integral part of the recycling process.
- 4 Organic produce may have a few blemishes but is free from chemicals.
- 5 Fresh organic produce.

## Ten places to find out more about organic gardening

- Australian Certified Organic [www.aco.net.au](http://www.aco.net.au) (07) 3350 5716
- Biodynamic Agriculture Australia [www.biodynamics.net.au](http://www.biodynamics.net.au) (02) 6655 0566
- Biodynamic Research Institute (BDRI) [www.demeter.org.au](http://www.demeter.org.au) (03) 5966 7333
- Bugs For Bugs [www.bugsforbugs.com.au](http://www.bugsforbugs.com.au) (07) 4165 4626
- NASAA Certified Organic [www.nasaa.com.au](http://www.nasaa.com.au) (08) 8370 8455
- Organic Herb Growers of Australia Incorporated (OHGA) (02) 6622 0100
- Organic Growers Association of WA [www.ogawa.org.au](http://www.ogawa.org.au) 9453 1783
- Permaculture International Ltd [www.permacultureinternational.org](http://www.permacultureinternational.org)
- Seed Savers' Network [www.seedsavers.net](http://www.seedsavers.net) (02) 8685 6624
- Tasmanian Organic-Dynamic Producers (TOP) [www.top.org.au](http://www.top.org.au) (03) 6383 4039

## Seed-saving networks

These exist to protect and preserve open-pollinated or non-hybrid plant varieties from artificial or genetic modification.

Seeds are saved and grown from heirloom, open-pollinated or heritage varieties of fruit, vegetables and flowers to retain their genetic diversity. Seeds are freely exchanged between members, who then provide feedback on the performance of a particular variety.

Seed banks and a handbook are available, along with information on specific agricultural and horticultural programs undertaken.

To protect our local species, always check with the Department of Agriculture or Australian Quarantine Inspection Service that the seeds you obtain are allowed in WA.

## Permaculture groups

Permaculture, or "permanent agriculture", was conceived by Bill Mollison in 1976. According to

Mollison's philosophy, permaculture is an approach to designing environments that have the stability, diversity and resilience of natural ecosystems.

We can learn how to cooperate with nature and each other by caring for the Earth and people. This practical application of ecological principles is used to develop sustainable, low-maintenance and energy-efficient land-use systems and lifestyle options that conserve our valuable resources.

## Is it really organic?

When buying organic produce how can you tell if it is really organic? Price or the word "organic" is not sufficient proof. Organic farming systems are more labour intensive, and hence this is reflected in the price.

To get over this problem, an organic certification program was set up in Australia during the 1980s to independently validate claims of being organic. Here, a set of specific organic standards are assessed by a team of independent auditors or







inspectors, which ensures that all aspects of the production cycle, including the farmers, processors and packaging, comply with these regulations.

### How can you tell if a product is certified?

Look for these genuine organic certifier labels. The symbols are an indication that the produce has met the minimum government requirements for organic food. Many producers exceed these requirements.



#### Australian Certified Organic

A division of the Biological Farmers of Australia (BFA). The "bud" is on around 70% of Australia's certified organic products.



#### NASAA Certified Organic

The National Association for Sustainable Agriculture (NASAA) is Australia's oldest and second largest certifier.

#### Other Australian certifiers

Organic Food Chain (OFC), Organic Growers of Australia (OGA) and Safe Food Queensland (SFQ).

#### Overseas certification

Check for certification marks on the product. Commonly seen ones include USDA, EU and JAS.

#### Demeter

The world's biodynamic certifier.

Buy your produce from reputable organic retailers. Ask your retailer or producer to show you their certification number or certificate. There should be a unique certification number for each certified operation as well as a batch code for each product. This allows a product to be traced back to its starting point.



1 Sweet corn growing in the organic garden at Naragup Buckingham Regional Environmental Centre.

283 The Margaret River Organic Garden on the Russell Highway is a community project run by volunteers.

## It's all about the soil

Organics focuses on maximising the health of the soil. Healthy soil produces healthy plants, which are then used to feed and produce healthy animals. These plants and animals then tend to be more resilient to pest and disease attack and are often more productive.

Added environmental benefits include fewer chemical residues in our rivers or waterways and a reduction in the depletion of our soils through monoculture, clearing or overuse.

## What you can do at home

So how can you start to create the right environment at home for a more resilient, productive and chemical-free garden?

By starting from the ground up, you can get the best from your garden and plants. If the soil is in great shape then the rest will almost look after itself. However, when spending money on the garden we are often happy to spend hundreds of dollars on plants, pavers, bricks and even paint, but when it comes to soil quality, this is often not even a consideration.

Poor soil quality is one of the main reasons why many plants struggle to survive or eventually succumb to pest and disease attack. There is no support from below to sustain the plant and to help ward off these insidious invaders.

I always advise gardeners or clients who have a poor soil or who are developing a new garden to add an organic soil mix or soil conditioner, depending on the situation. What is the difference?

A soil mix is formulated for a specific type or group of plants in the garden and may contain organic matter, compost, manures, loam and sand. For instance, vegetable mix, azalea/camelia mix, rose mix or landscaping mix can be used where required in the garden.

A soil conditioner is any organic matter, compost or manure that is mixed or dug into the existing sandy soil to improve it before planting. This can be used directly in the planting hole or over bigger areas, where it may be too impractical or expensive to bring in huge

amounts of soil.

When buying a soil mix or conditioner, check with the supplier to ensure that the materials are organic and/or that it complies with the Australian Standard 4454 for composts, mulches and soil conditioners. Check out the certification websites for WA certified organic producers for composts, manures and soil conditioners made from livestock fed purely on organically grown food and pasture.

## What are the benefits of improving the soil with organic soil improvers and conditioners?

- Increased water-holding capacity that reduces the plants' susceptibility to drought and heat.
- Improved soil fertility, resulting in healthy, vigorous plants with less need to use synthetic fertilisers. When the organic matter breaks down it eventually forms humus. Humus works like a negatively charged magnet that traps positively charged nutrients or fertilisers in the soil or water. Rather than being leached away, lost or unavailable to the plants, these nutrients are held in the soil and released as the plants require them.
- Improved structure of the soil. The addition of organic matter helps to open up or aerate heavy soils for drainage and improves the overall crumb structure for enhanced root growth.
- Improved plant resistance to pest and disease problems.
- Increased buffering capacity. The soil is better able to resist environmental changes due to its improved organic content.
- Increased microbial activity. The resulting worms, micro-organisms and bacteria will hasten the breakdown of the organic matter and help speed up the above benefits.



# Don't forget the Seasol!

[www.seasol.com](http://www.seasol.com)

