

REDUCING PESTICIDES

it's perfectly natural.



THE ORGANIC FLOWER GARDEN

Organic gardening is premised on the simple maxim that when we feed the soil the plants will thrive. Strategies for successful organic flower gardening that follow from this include:

- enhancing the soil on an ongoing basis with organic matter;
- choosing the right plants for the growing conditions;
- using mulch and water effectively;
- feeding plants with organic fertilizers;
- being vigilant with respect to weeds, pests and diseases and using organic controls only when necessary.

Separate fact sheets in this series address each of these topics in detail. This fact sheet will focus on issues of special interest for organic flower gardens.

Most gardeners would like their ornamental plantings to provide three, if not four, seasons of ongoing interest. To achieve this objective, the organic gardener needs to grow many different plants. This increased biodiversity improves the garden's health as well as its ongoing ornamental interest.

Wise planting strategies for the organic flower garden include choosing pest and disease resistant varieties of plants that will thrive in your garden's specific conditions and grouping those plants together based on shared requirements. Many native plants provide attractive alternatives; however, it is still important to remember to match your growing conditions to those of the plant.

Look for groups of plants that can "carry" each season. For example, in a sunny garden you might consider:

- daffodils, species tulips and other spring-flowering bulbs for early spring
- hardy roses and peonies for the early summer
- brown-eyed susans and coneflowers for the height of summer
- fall-blooming asters for colour until the killing frosts
- perennial grasses to provide winter interest

The use of flowering shrubs and dwarf conifers interspersed with annual and perennial flowers adds shape, texture and variety to the garden and provides additional winter interest when flowering plants are dormant.



This fact sheet has been prepared by the Toronto Master Gardeners



In gardens shaded by deciduous trees, the organic flower gardener can enjoy early colour by focusing on spring bulbs and perennials that bloom before the trees leaf out such as *Helleborus* (Lenten Rose), *Anemone blanda*, and *Dicentra* (Bleeding Heart). Attention can then shift to shade-tolerant flowering plants such as *Tiarella* (Foamflower), *Polygonatum odoratum* (Solomon's Seal) and to foliage plants such as hostas and ferns. Annuals such as *Impatiens* and *Begonias* can also add colour to the shady garden.

In selecting plants for the organic flower garden there are a number of design factors to consider. These include:

- Group the plants by using 3 – 5 of each variety planted together. This provides a more pleasing display and avoids the chopiness that can result from having too many different plants in an area.
- Look for flowering plants that maintain good foliage after blooming to provide continued interest and attractiveness. Examples would include peonies, astilbes, hardy geraniums and coral bells. In contrast, certain perennials such as Oriental poppies, while worth having for their beautiful blooms, can be an eyesore after flowering. Plant them behind other later flowering perennials.
- Provide interest from contrasting and harmonizing foliage as well as flower colours.
- Repetition of the same plant or similar plants in a number of locations will help unify the flower garden.

In caring for the organic flower garden, the gardener should be aware that some perennials will need to be divided every few years to continue blooming strongly. Whenever perennials are divided, extra organic matter should be added to the soil before the divisions are replanted. Signs that a plant may need division include fewer and smaller flowers; the centre of the plant becoming bare and woody; or an overall appearance of reduced vigour.

Some common perennials that need division every 3 – 5 years include phlox, astilbe and rudbeckia. Others such as hostas, daylilies and peonies can remain in place for many years and need only be divided when flowering is reduced, they have outgrown their location or if additional plants are desired. Most plants can be divided in spring unless they are spring flowering. These should be divided after flowering or in the early fall. Care must be taken to ensure that they receive adequate water until re-established. Some perennials (mostly those with tap roots), including *Baptisia* (False Indigo) and *Dictamnus* (Gas Plant), resent disturbance and should not be divided and only be moved if necessary.

Other factors to consider in caring for the organic flower garden, beyond those shared by all organic gardening endeavours, include:

- deadheading flowers does extend the bloom period for almost all flowering plants
- leaving perennial grasses and other plants with interesting seedheads standing through the winter (with clean-up in early spring) increases the attractiveness of the garden in the depths of winter.

With a little planning and just a little work you can have a beautiful organic flower garden that provides interest throughout the year.