



GROW NATURAL

It's good for your health

SELECTING THE RIGHT PLANTS FOR YOUR ORGANIC GARDEN

Organic gardening sounds like a huge jump for many gardeners. It is sometimes construed to mean the whole garden has to be redesigned and existing plants scrapped. In fact, in many cases your garden may already be ideally suited to “go organic”.

First off, you need to choose plants that are suited to your garden. A little planning at this stage will ensure you acquire the right plants for the right spot or move the ones that are mismatched. Healthy, well-chosen plants, planted in their preferred environment will prosper.

Examine your garden in terms of soil type, moisture content, amount of sun received, and any environmental considerations such as salt or extreme wind. You likely have a mix of conditions, but make note of what and where. Whether you have an existing garden, or are creating a new one, going through this planning exercise will help you avoid pitfalls down the road.

Plant or Garden Characteristic	Description	How to Tell
Hardiness	Will your selection survive winter's worst in your garden? Don't assume because it's available, it is hardy.	Toronto is located in zone 6a of the Canadian Plant Hardiness Zones. Plants rated hardy to this zone, or with a lower number, are suitable. If you plant in a very exposed area you should consider plants with a 5b rating for a better safety margin. The higher the number, the less hardy the plant.
Soil type	Will the plant thrive in the kind of soil you have in your garden? Is your soil acidic or alkaline?	A very primitive soil test is to pick up a 1-inch clump of soil and roll it into a ball. If you are successful, you have clay soil. If it falls completely apart, it's sandy soil, and if it's sort of in-between, but then falls completely apart, it's loamy soil. Most Toronto soils are alkaline, with a pH of around 7.5. Acidic soils have a pH lower than 7. Your soil is acidic if rhododendrons and heathers grow well without soil amendments.
Moisture Content	Does your soil retain moisture when you water or when it rains? Or is the moisture gone in an instant?	Wait a couple of hours after it rains or watering. Dig down about eight inches, scoop a small handful of soil and squeeze in your hand. If water drips out, it's moist. If it stays together but leaves an imprint on your hand, it's average, and if it crumbles, it's dry.
Sunlight	Less than ideal light means a weaker plant, more susceptible to pests and diseases.	Most plants are labelled with the amount of sun they require. Watch your garden to see how many hours of sunlight each location receives or will receive when trees are in full leaf.
Environmental conditions	Make sure you understand the environmental conditions in your garden. You could have several micro-climates to consider in your planning.	Consider how the wind blows across beds or around corners. Will plants be exposed to salt or other chemicals (think of your driveway in winter)? Will the planting location make a difference to rain or wind (e.g. under a roof overhang, on a very exposed corner)? Is there adequate air circulation or is it very humid and still in some areas?

Plant or Garden Characteristic	Description	How to Tell
Variety in Plant Families	Many diseases and pests attack entire families of plants. Family variety helps ensure that infection is not easily passed through your garden bed and that pests that prefer one type of plant have a limited menu.	Consult a reference book to ensure variety in plant families. Brussels sprouts, kale, cabbage and cauliflower are all susceptible to club root, because they're all in the Brassica family. Likewise, hollyhock rust is a threat not only to hollyhocks, but to hibiscus and several malvas.
Growth Rate	Consider the space you wish to fill. Select a plant that will fit within that space now and years from now. Consider how it will affect plantings around it.	Expected height and width of the plant is usually noted on the plant tag or label. Many also state the expected growth rate or size after one year.
Welcome Wildlife	Some wildlife is good and some not so welcome. Add plant material (like shrubs with berries) and other inducements to encourage the 'good' visitors.	Birds are a welcome addition to most gardens just for their song. Many also have an endearing habit of eating bugs. The same thing goes for ladybugs, frogs, bats, toads, and even some predatory insects that snack on flowers between buggy meals. Make them welcome.
Companion Planting	Some plants make it difficult for competitors to succeed in the surrounding area. Others are beneficial to their neighbours. Try to understand how your selections will tolerate or affect each other.	Whether considering large plants like trees or smaller plantings, check reference books for good companion plantings. Examples: chives planted at the base of roses may repel aphids; garlic at the base a peach tree may repel borers; basil planted among tomatoes may repel tomato hornworms; planting thyme or lavender in borders may deter slugs.

While native species are often said to be the best answer in an organic garden, this is only true if your garden matches the natural environment of the plant in question. Read the labels carefully, make sure you can meet the needs of the plants you choose.

Once you understand what types of plants you want in your garden and where they will thrive, choose plants that are labelled as insect- or disease-resistant and that are healthy to start with. While many hostas are susceptible to slug damage, new varieties are constantly being developed that are resistant to slugs. Likewise, older phlox are frequently susceptible to powdery mildew while newer varieties are much less so. Improvements in resistance to disease or pest are usually noted on the plant tag in the nursery or identified clearly in seed catalogues. They are your preferred selection to begin your organic garden.