

# The Green Thumb

Lawn and Garden News You Can Use

June 2008

## Tips for Going Organic

David Robson, horticulture educator

Organic gardening (without the use of man-made chemicals to control weeds, diseases, and insects) grows more popular each year. You can increase your chances of success with organic gardening if you follow some sound gardening practices.

As a starter, choose varieties that can be grown with little or no danger of damage from disease or insect pests. Radishes, lettuce, onions, leeks, chives, beets, chard, mustard, Chinese cabbage, parsnips, salsify, peas, spinach, sweet potatoes, turnips, and most herbs fill this bill and can be grown with great success.

If you're willing to use biological methods to control insects, such as a spray of *Bacillus thuringiensis* (a bacteria insecticide to control caterpillars), you may add cabbage, kale, collards, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, and cauliflower to the roster.

You can grow tomatoes if you handpick tomato hornworms and snip off shoots that are harboring aphids. Stake, cage, or mulch the plants to keep the fruit from coming in contact with the ground.

Sweet corn can also be successfully grown in Illinois without the aid of chemicals if you pay attention to timing. Corn planted between May 7 and May 30 will generally silk after June 15 and before mid-July, a period during which there is little risk of serious earworm infestation.

Most organic gardeners will run into trouble if they attempt to grow vine crops such as cucumber, muskmelon, pumpkin, squash, and eggplant. These crops are attacked by insects that can be controlled only by chemicals.

Here are some more suggestions to help ensure a successful garden:

- Interplant varieties, but maintain adequate spacing for good air movement.
- Avoid spreading diseases. If a plant does become diseased, immediately remove the infected leaves or the entire plant. Diseases spread quickly.
- Don't water in the evening or walk through the garden when it's damp.
- Use fresh, commercial seed that is grown under disease-free conditions.
- Keep out weeds and grass by shallow hoeing or mulching. Weeds compete for fertility, water, and space; weeds also harbor insects and diseases. Straw, grass clippings, and sawdust make good mulches.

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# Strawberry Care After Harvest

Tony Bratsch, horticulture educator



As the harvest season for strawberries winds down in June, the important task of “renovation” gets underway. Renovation keeps the planting vigorous and sets the stage for good fruit production next year.

Renovation should be done after the last berries are picked—no later than two to three weeks after harvest. During this period, the plants enter a brief resting or dormant period. Renovation involves mowing old foliage, reclaiming over-grown walkways, thinning excess plants, fertilizing and weed control, and timely irrigation. Start the process by mowing off the old foliage, raking and removing it. This helps reduce foliar disease and stimulate new growth. Sharpen mower blades, and cut about 1 inch above the crown or growing point. Do not cut into the crown.

Next, reclaim original walkways over-grown with last season’s runners. Use a small tiller to cultivate between the rows and narrow them to 1 to 2 feet in width. This will involve some loss of plants. If the planting is several years old, judiciously remove (by hoeing) 10 to 25 percent of older, less productive plants in each row’s middle. This will thin the main row and provide room for new plants to grow. Walkways can be mulched with straw or other organic material to control weeds; avoid mulching row middles.

Fertilizing is next. Broadcast 1 to 1.5 pounds of a general analysis fertilizer such as 13-13-13 for every 100 square feet of bed area. An equivalent substitution of a soluble fertilizer such as Miracle Gro™ can also be used. Water in granular fertilizers. Renovation is a good time to focus on weed control. Hand pulling and hoeing are effective for small plantings; herbicides are useful in larger plantings. During this resting period, strawberries are resistant to 2,4-D, a common broadleaf weed killer. Thus, they can be over-sprayed with this herbicide from early to late winter, and during the brief summer resting period.

2,4-D will kill dandelions, henbit, and chickweed. Always use an amine form of this herbicide and one without other materials such as dicamba mixed with it. Some plants such as grapes and tomatoes are sensitive to 2,4-D, so note the wind direction. Another option is sethoxydim (Poast™), a selective grass-only herbicide. Apply it before runners and new “daughter” plants develop. DCPA or Dacthal™ is a pre-emergent herbicide that prevents certain weeds from germinating and can be applied in the spring and during renovation. Both materials can be purchased at agricultural supply outlets, but usually not in garden centers. Carefully follow label directions on all weed control products to prevent plant injury. Avoid using Roundup™ in strawberries except as a careful spot treatment. Note that Preen™ is not labeled for use in strawberries.

As plants begin to re-grow, leaves may develop disease spotting; a few well-timed fungicide sprays will help protect the new foliage. Runners will soon develop and new “daughter” plants will form at the tips of the runners. You can let these runners randomly take root on the row edges or you can direct them to fill bare spots in the row. New daughter plants on the tilled row edge can be productive the next year. Leave about 4 to 6 inches between plants.

Strawberries set buds for next year’s crop in the early fall. Management to keep them vigorous and forming new plants after renovation is important. Be sure to provide supplemental water during dry periods. A follow-up application of soluble fertilizer in early to mid-August can help maintain vigor. Avoid over-application or plants may not harden off well for winter.

Lastly, don’t use 2,4-D for fall weed control until several hard freezes have occurred and plants are dormant. During late November or December, cover them with 2 to 4 inches of clean straw to reduce frost heaving and root damage during the winter.

# Question Corner

Answers provided by David Robson, U of I Extension horticulture educator

**Q.** At the end of last summer, I planted a crape myrtle tree in my yard. My soil is a heavy clay. I followed the planting instructions and put in plenty of potting soil that was formulated for trees and shrubs, and watered it faithfully. In the past week, it has started sprouting leaves, but only on a couple of branches. The rest of it looks bare. What can I do to save it?

**A.** The best thing to do is prune out the dead and encourage the remaining to grow. Over the next several years, shape the plant to the form you want. But since some limb/branches have died, don't expect a perfectly shaped plant. Crape myrtles are not reliably hardy in Illinois, even more so when planted in the fall. They should be planted in the spring so that roots can adapt as much as possible before winter. (This past winter was harsh on many of the semi-hardy plants in the state...whether in Cairo or Rockford.)

Don't overwater the plant. It will develop root rots like rhododendrons and azaleas.

For this winter, mulch the plant heavily, but leave a gap of an inch at the trunk to limit animal injury.

**Q.** I want to add some plants to my yard to attract butterflies. I prefer perennials. Can you suggest some?

**A.** There are many plants that are attractive to butterflies. Here are some that are native to Illinois:

Aster—*Aster* spp.

Common Yarrow—*Achillea millefolium*

Butterfly Weed—*Asclepias tuberosa*

Smooth Blue Aster—*Aster laevis*

Purple Coneflower—*Echinacea purpurea*

Blazing Star—*Liatris spicata*

Wild Bergamot—*Monarda fistulosa*

Obedient Plant—*Physostegia virginiana*

Goldenrod—*Solidago* hybrids

Butterflies need warmth and sunshine, so locate plants in a sunny area that is somewhat protected from the wind. You can also put some dark-colored boulders or rocks in the garden area to provide a warm resting spot for butterflies. Place the rocks where sunlight heats them up early in the morning and/or late afternoon. When butterflies can keep warm and fly longer, they can feed more, search longer for mates, and potentially lay more eggs. All of this can lead to more butterflies. Also avoid using pesticides in your butterfly garden area.



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- To avoid soil compaction, don't work the soil when it's wet.
- Use compost, manure, steamed bone meal, rock phosphate, and muriate of potash or wood ashes to provide nutrients for garden plants.
- Plant at the proper time.
- When feasible, use stakes, cages, or other training methods to support plants.
- A plant that is growing in good soil, with proper water and fertilizer, can withstand insect and disease problems. Maintain proper moisture levels throughout the growing season.

# Sweet Potato Vine: An Attractive Plant for the Home Landscape

Ed Billingsley, guest columnist



Ornamental sweet potato vines are a popular addition to many landscapes. Sweet potato vines do well in full sun to light shade in well-drained soils.

The variety “Blackie” was the first one introduced to gardeners and is still popular today. Its dark purple, almost black, leaves add contrast to any container or garden border. “Margarita” is another favorite; it is chartreuse, which means yellow-green leaves. There are also variegated leaf varieties such as “Sweet Caroline” green/yellow and “Tricolor” green/white/pink or gray variegation.

All of these varieties are proven winner selections, which means they have been tried and proven across the U.S.

These plants are gorgeous ground covers. You can also put them in hanging baskets, but they will need more fertilizer and water due to a reduced root area. Sweet potato plants are also attractive on a slight slope. Their color and vining nature can make a neighborhood stir with envy.

Insects are not much of a threat except for chewing holes in the leaves. But when the plant is used as a border or ground cover, the holes can be overlooked.

Sweet potato vines will not survive Southern Illinois winters. But, you can dig the root before freezing and store in a cool place. In the spring, just replant the root and soon it will be visible again.



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