



What's this organic?

by Barbara Jacobsen

"Organic gardening" means growing food crops and ornamentals, using natural fertilizers and natural insect repellants. Ultimately it's based on faith; the verbal theory attached to it goes like this: a plant will be healthy and resistant to disease and predatory insects if it receives proper nutrition (the same applies to people). For a plant to be properly fed, the SOIL must be healthy.

Organic materials added to the soil build humus - which is simply decayed material. Humus breaks down clay, makes it softer. Humus added to sandy soil aids water retention, and adds nutrients. That's what compost is all about. When you use kitchen waste, grass clippings, manure and lime to make a compost heap, you eventually get a black crumbly rich humus which has lots of soil organisms (the micro-organisms responsible for the breaking down process), worms, and the three big nutrients--Nitrogen, Phosphorus and Potassium. Plus an incredible little magic element called humic acid. This by-product of decomposing plants stimulates root growth, and possibly has much to do with the breakdown of nutrients into forms that plant roots can absorb.

Chemical fertilizers (some of which are waste products of industry), must also undergo

chemical changes before plants can use them. These chemicals do not encourage soil organisms and often kill them; that's why many commercial agricultural lands are in bad shape - no soil organisms, no humus, no water retention, no adequate breakdown of chemical substances, no fertilization: so they add more fertilizer.

It's the same food chain; but we know there are more consumers to consider. The micro-organisms in the soil must have food in a form that they can use. Their by-products feed the soil itself which feeds plants, which feed animals.

Organic, or natural fertilizers and insect repellants may be hard to define - you think about it. It seems to me that those products which the chemical companies sell after much sophisticated tinkering require much equipment and specialized knowledge. Organic fertilizers are all around us and require little or no processing: blood meal, rich in nitrogen, is dried blood, a by-product of slaughterhouses. There is lots of phosphorus in sea weed. And there is potassium in wood ashes. Powdered hot peppers and water kill aphids.

If you can find a better definition, let me know, care of The Emerald. Better yet, just do it, get the feel of it, and remember you want to feed soil microbes and soil, not poison it.

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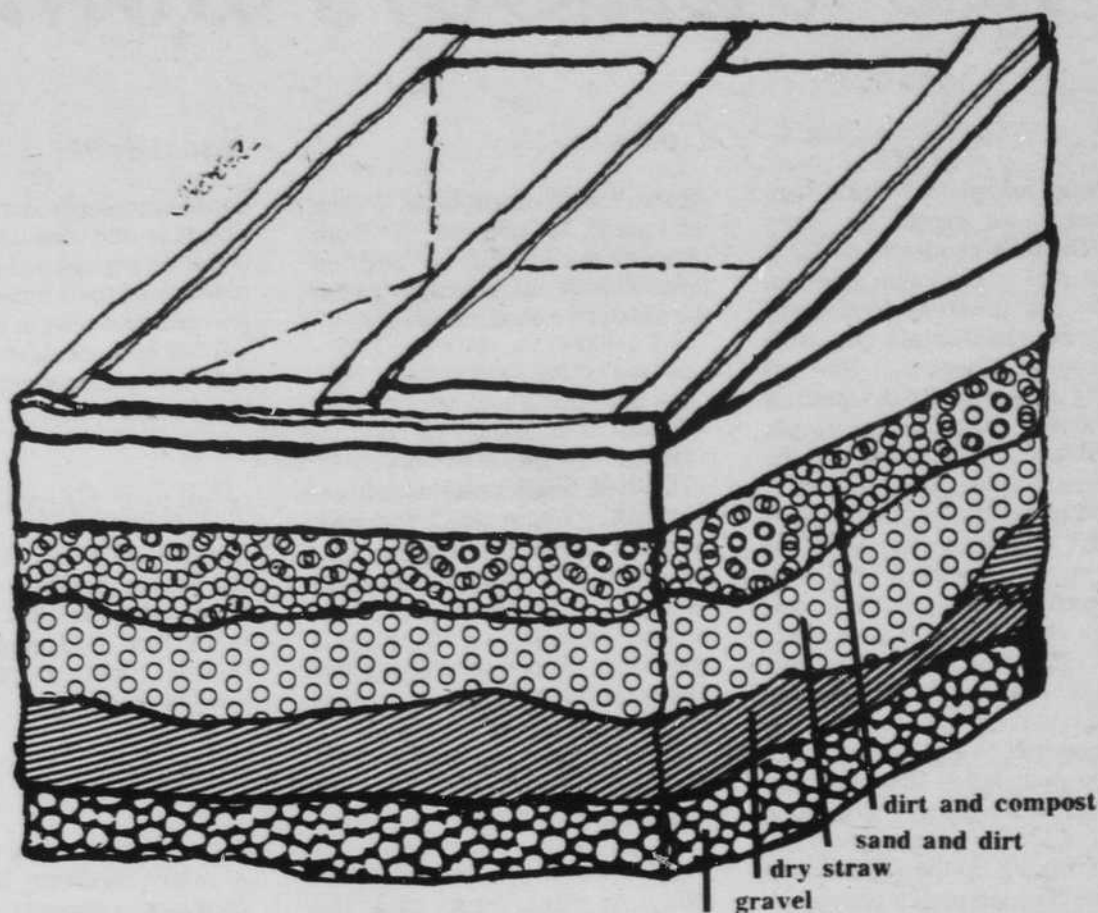
Barbara Jacobsen, better known as Flora DeVine, is a long-time Eugene resident, has gardened organically on a commercial basis for several years, and is currently working as an independent landscape contractor.

Susan Applegate, from Yoncalla, Oregon, works for a local florist in greenhouse and floral work, raises orchids and runs her own small greenhouse here in Eugene.



The garden plots at the city-donated community garden in Eugene's Alton F. Baker park are all taken. If you're an apartment or dorm-bound gardener, and missed your chance at one of these spaces, call the Celeste Campbell Senior Citizens Center at 687-5318. Many of their members have garden plots available that require tending, and would give you the room to exercise your green thumb.

Elementary cold frames



Seedlings begun outdoors need fine soil, good drainage, protection from too-hot days and too much wind; thus, a cold frame.

For this cold frame the materials required include:

2 x 4's; enough lineal feet to meet your specifications. Keep in mind that you'll be leaning over and across it to plant, thin and weed, so plan your width dimensions accordingly.

Enough plywood to cut a triangular piece which will raise the back end by at least 5".

1 x 2's, or even lathe, to construct the top of the cold frame

Visqueen, or any heavy mil polyethylene

Staples, to staple the plastic to the top frame

Hinges, for raising the lid of the frame

Lathe strips, if you want to tack down the edges of the visqueen to the frame lid.

To prepare the ground for the cold frame:

Dig at least one foot down.

Then make the layers as shown in the diagram

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