

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info



Creating a Healthy Garden from the Start

Dear EcoGirl: How can I setup my garden now so that it's healthy and abundant, and won't need toxic pesticides? *Signed, Cultivating in Cotati*

Dear Cultivating: How smart you are to plan ahead! Yes, for many of us, the first murmurs of spring bring thoughts of creating a beautiful garden, overflowing with luscious vegetables and flowers. What a joyful way to participate in (and share) nature's bounty.

Indeed, a great way to help make those dreams come true, without any need for toxics, is by starting your garden on a solid foundation now. Your rewards will be healthier food, fewer pests, and a safer world for all.

Just Follow These Easy Steps

(1) Weed your garden while the ground is still soft (though not muddy). The work will be much easier, and you won't need toxic herbicides. Invite a friend to share the fun!

(2) Loosen your soil. When plants can stretch their roots, they grow bigger and more plentiful. So dig or rototill your garden spot, at least 6" deep, to loosen compaction.

(3) Nurture with natural fertilizers. When your soil is healthy, your plants are stronger and less vulnerable to pests, and your food is more tasty and nutritious. Feeding the soil feeds you!

First identify the amendments your garden needs. Most soils benefit from organic matter (such as compost), especially if they're high in clay, as most are around here. Compost helps loosen the soil, improve drainage, and increase biological

activity. Also consider adding an appropriate general fertilizer plus nutrients such as bone meal, rock minerals, or kelp.

For more specific advice for your situation, bring a soil sample to a nursery such as Harmony Farm Supply (823-9125, <www.harmonyfarm.com>). For more precision, consider a soil test for \$20-50. This can help ensure that you get the most from your gardening investments! For more amendment suggestions, see <www.extremelygreen.com/fertilizerguide.cfm>.

Be sure all products you use are natural (non-synthetic) and approved for organic farming (sometimes marked with an OMRI seal). Then you'll truly nourish your plants and avoid the toxics and heavy metals often found in mainstream fertilizers.

(4) Choose plants wisely. Whether you grow from seeds or starts, picking the right plant for the right spot helps ensure happy and non-toxic gardening. Aligning with nature makes life so much easier!

Look at your garden area at different times of day. Is it always sunny, sometimes sunny, or shady? Then find the right fit. For example, tomatoes, zucchinis, and peppers need lots of sun, while lettuces will bolt (go to seed) if hit by hot summer heat.

Consider getting companion plants, which some say help protect other plants – for instance, pairing marigolds with tomatoes. (Various books offer more specifics.)

Also, if you're new to gardening or including children, plant something that grows quickly, like radish seeds,

so that everyone can see results right away.

Of course, choose organic plants and seeds. You'll be supporting growers who avoid toxics and starting your garden with strong plants that have been nurtured not poisoned.

(5) Plant well. Ask your nursery when they think the risk of freeze will likely be past this year, and when to plant what. Also, be sure to give each seedling enough room. Yes, squash really does grow that big!

(6) Garden organically, using less-toxic earth-friendly methods for keeping your garden happy.

For more information about all these steps, see the books and magazines at Harmony and Copperfields. Also check out <www.organicgardening.com>.

I hope you now feel ready and inspired to create a safe and healthy garden for you and your family — and that you enjoy many delightful harvests in return!

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter. Email your questions about going green to <EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info> for possible inclusion in future columns. View past columns at <www.AskEcoGirl.info>. Also contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical. "EcoGirl believes that everyone can be a superhero for the planet. Then she shows you how!"

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