

Quick start guide to growing some of your own food (vegetables, herbs, and greens) organically and sustainably.

Beds. For Houston, you should grow your food plants in dirt whose surface is at least ~6-24 inches higher than the surrounding ground. The taller end of the range is important if you are growing root vegetables. You can build a short wall around the bed to hold the dirt in (bricks, wood, cinder blocks, etc.) or just cover the mounded dirt with ~3 inches of shredded hardwood mulch.

Dirt. The stuff you grow your vegetables, herbs, and greens in should be loose and relatively easy to dig in. It should contain a very high percentage of organic matter mixed in. **Organic matter is defined here as dead stuff. Examples: any combination of shredded native hardwood mulch, twigs, dead plants, composted manure, mushroom compost, leaf mold compost, leaves, compost, grass clippings, coffee grounds, and newspaper.** Organic matter, here, is not referring to any 'organic' soil amendments such as 'green' sand, micro-life, bone meal, etc. These will probably not hurt your dirt but they are not necessary and have used up valuable global resources to produce and ship. Compost from your own yard and organic kitchen waste is an important part of building healthy dirt and a healthy planet. Organic matter in your dirt provides food and shelter for the complex web of organisms, many of them too small to see. These organisms normally exist in healthy dirt and are necessary for growing healthy vegetables, herbs, and greens using organic and sustainable gardening practices. They produce the 'fertilizer' for your plants and they help protect against the minority of microorganisms that cause plant disease. You don't need to add these beneficial microorganisms to the dirt, they will come from the existing surroundings and think they have found heaven! Be patient, good dirt is like fine wine, it improves with age. Keep adding dead organic matter to keep your dirt happy!

Mulch. Keep the dirt covered with organic matter (any combination of shredded native hardwood mulch, twigs, dead plants, leaf mold compost, leaves, compost, grass clippings, and newspaper.). This helps keep the water in the dirt and keeps the temperature of the dirt more even. Also all the dead stuff sitting on the surface is slowly breaking down (decomposing / composting) and providing nutrients to your plants and dirt. Move mulch out of the way to plant.

Compost. Simple 2 bin, no turn method.

Site preparation. If your site is hard clay, soften it with water and break it open a shovel's depth, if possible. Sprinkle broken ground with dead stuff and sand/or sandy soil (if available). Then cover with more dead stuff and top with mulch. The clay has great minerals for your plants, the dead stuff attracts and provides food for worms and the other important soil organisms. The sand and dead stuff help keep the clay open to the roots.

Sun. You do **NOT** need 6-8 hours of sun to grow some of your own food. Many very nutritious herbs (parsley, cilantro, mint, lovage, etc.) and greens (kale, mustard, cholesterol spinach, sweet potato greens, etc.) can grow with only a few hours of sun or even in dappled shade under trees.

Water. Plants and dirt are alive. They need water to stay alive. You can hand water or install a drip line. Easy to install drip lines are available from many sources and can be run on an inexpensive battery-run timer. Or you can hire a company to come and install a system.

Maintenance. Relax! In a biologically diverse (healthy garden) not much is needed. For fire ants use

bait products that list 'spinosad' compounds as the only active ingredient. Spinosad is organic and, in bait form, very effective against fire ants. [spinosad wiki page](#) However, spinosad in spray form is highly toxic to bees and should not be used. **Just because it is labeled organic doesn't mean it is safe to use in an environmentally friendly garden!** Likewise Bt products are also organic and used to eliminate 'unfriendly' caterpillars on your vegetables, but it will kill all butterfly and moth caterpillars! [Bt wiki web page](#) Use products sparingly, if at all. Learn the properties of all the listed active ingredients. Gain additional protection against pests by planting a variety of food plants.

Herbs and Greens. If your space is limited herbs and greens are some of the easiest, most nutritious, and most productive food plants you can grow. Most are cut and come again and / or perennial.

Seeds and plants are pre-programmed to grow! People do not make seeds grow, nature does. Keep plants watered, be patient, and they will grow!