

BIOLOGICAL CONTROLS

An increasingly wide range of controls is available. This list gives an idea of those currently on the market. It should be stressed that these are perfectly natural methods, will not and cannot "get out of control" and are fully supported by the UK's leading authority on organic gardening, Garden Organic.

Nematodes are available to treat slugs, vine weevil, leather jackets and cabbage white caterpillars. The microscopic nematode worms arrive in a paste which is watered on to the soil, lawn or plants as applicable. The nematodes infect and kill the pest within a few days.

Parasitic mites and wasps are available for use against whitefly and red spider mite.

Ladybirds (adults and larvae), lacewing larvae and Aphidius (parasitic wasps) are all available to deal with aphids.



To see examples of all these techniques and a wide range of organically grown plants visit

the ASK Organic Garden

a half acre garden within Woodside Walled Garden, situated 4 miles north of Jedburgh, east of the A68 on the B6400.

The ASK Organic Garden is open 7 days a week March to October 10am to 5pm. Someone from ASK is usually on hand to answer questions on Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays between 11am and 4pm.

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HOME GROWN:

the organic way



Growing Well

As the summer develops, it's increasingly important to maintain good growing conditions. Plants that are growing strongly are much more likely to withstand attack by pests and diseases. This includes keeping them well fed and well watered. If pests do become a problem, biological controls are a safe and environmentally sound solution.



WATERING

It is always important to make sure that plants have the correct amount of watering. Dry, stressed fruit and veg will produce small fruits and succumb to many problems. Plants with large leaves shelter the soil beneath them from the rain, like an umbrella, so summer showers often do less good than you think.

Potato leaves in particular prevent rain from reaching the growing tubers. Without proper watering, you will have a small crop and possibly cracked tubers or 'hollow heart'. This is where the centre of the potato is hollow, surrounded by black and half rotting flesh.

Other crops, like peas and beans, will be much lower growing than usual and the leaf tips will seem scorched. Globe artichokes, celery and celeriac will be stringy and roots will be small and tough.

A long spell of dry weather, followed by a few days of rain will cause many varieties, like onions, to bolt. A long, cool, sunless spell will also reduce growth and encourage a wide range of fungal problems.

You can prevent drought problems by laying leaky hose at planting and watering regularly to keep plants growing well. Mulching prevents evaporation from the soil surface, as well as suppressing weeds, so reduces the need for watering. It is suitable for fruit bushes and most vegetables, except roots, like carrots. The mulch must be laid when the ground is damp to conserve the moisture since light summer showers cannot penetrate a mulch.

If you haven't installed leaky hose, this can still be done, provided you take care not to damage the established plants. The best approach is to have a nightly rota, where some rows or pots are given a good soaking and are then left for several days or a week while other parts of the veg patch are watered in turn. Every vegetable does need a regular supply of water, but some need it more than others. Potatoes, tomatoes, cucumbers, brassicas, courgettes, peppers, squashes, and celery and celeriac are among the thirstiest. Legumes, peas and beans, appreciate water but don't rely on large quantities.

If using a grow bag for tomatoes, peppers or cucumbers, be sure the water gets everywhere in the bag, as the roots certainly will. If you don't have a leaky hose, a dripper bottle, like Aqua Balance, will deliver a regular supply of water to containers.

NUTRIENTS

As a general rule, plants will get all the nutrients they need from the soil, so adding extra encourages sappy, pest attracting, leafy growth and less fruit. Don't be tempted to be too lavish. When planting salad vegetables at the edge of a bed or as a quick catch crop, no extra compost should be added. Roots, like carrots, definitely do not need compost.

Vegetables that do need a top up are those growing in containers or grow bags and the very greedy tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers. The best liquid feed for fruiting veg is liquid comfrey. It contains a good NPK balance (nitrogen, phosphorous, potassium), but is specially rich in the element potassium (K). This encourages plants to flower and fruit well. You can make your own, free liquid comfrey or buy it in a bottle. Start weekly feeding when the first fruits begin to set and give a little extra to plants growing outside when they have had the nutrients washed away by heavy rain.

When growing your own comfrey, choose Russian comfrey. It is sterile and only spreads as its roots grow. Wild comfrey will seed throughout the garden, so is likely to cause problems. You can often find this comfrey growing in open spaces, by hedgerows, so you will be able to cut it there. When plants reach budding stage, cut to ground level and put the leaves in a container, covering well to exclude any rain water. After 4/5 weeks, the leaves will have rotted down, squeeze out all the liquid and dilute it 20 parts water: 1 part comfrey.

Liquid seaweed is highly recommended: it acts as a tonic for many plants and, when sprayed on leaves, helps the plant resist pests and diseases. It can be used as an alternative to comfrey.

Liquid from a wormery has some nutrient, though the levels are hard to gauge. You can also 'drown' the roots of couch grass or ground elder in a bucket. After 4 or 5 weeks, the roots will be drowned, can be safely put on the compost heap, and the strained liquid can be used as a feed. Like wormery liquid, it is impossible to gauge the strength, but you can dilute 5 parts water: 1 part feed. Nettle leaves and roots can be soaked this way for good results to keep crops growing.

Container grown plants benefit from a top dressing of wormcast or even roughish compost. Apply this half way through the season, usually in June. It acts as a tonic for the plants at the point where the original compost has become less rich.