



## 7 Keys to Organic Gardening

**A Kentucky farmer passes on his wisdom to other gardeners who want to grow organic.**

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Implementing organic gardening methods will make your garden's vegetables healthier, tastier and heartier, says organic farmer Jerome Lange. If the next step in your gardening adventure is to grow organically, then your goals are within reach.

Jerome Lange, a vegetable farmer in Casey County, Ky., has been gardening for more than 30 years, and in the past decade or so has been honing his organic technique. Through a trial-and-error method in his 2½-acre garden in Mennonite country, he attempts to garden in a way that feeds the earth that nourishes our food.

"My uncle once said, 'We remembered the corn, but we forgot the fish,'" Lange recalls. Alluding to the proverb "Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime," he means that the agricultural methods that have become commonplace in the U.S. have literally destroyed the farm and garden, stripping the soil of its nutrients and robbing crops of flavor and nourishment.

Everything he learns, he intends to pass on to other gardeners. In his book *Remembering the Fish: The Seven Keys – An Organic Approach to Gardening in Kentucky* Lange details what he has labeled as the "seven keys" to organics. The keys serve as a checklist on his own farm. If something goes awry—carrots lose flavor or kale looks stunted—he walks through each step, starting from the top, to figure out what he left out.

### 1. Observation

"It starts with going out and looking at plants—just looking at them," Lange says. If your tomatoes have a blemished color or your celery is spiny, then something in your organic gardening technique isn't working. Once you realize what your problems are, start talking to fellow gardeners who have gotten it right. Never stop asking questions.

### 2. Lime

Adding lime sweetens and loosens the soil and helps drain water. While 3 tons of lime per acre of land is a gardening standard, Lange recommends an initial "heavy liming" of 12 to 15 tons per acre and 1 ton per acre each year after. The end result will be a crop that tastes better and lasts longer.

### 3. Cultivation

While it's common knowledge that plant leaves take in carbon dioxide and release oxygen, few people know that plant roots do the opposite. "If soil loads up with carbon dioxide and there's no oxygen, that plant will be stunted," Lange says.

By cultivating—or aerating—the soil, plant roots will get the necessary oxygen to grow and hold moisture. The method of cultivation is not important—be it hoeing, composting, sanding, et cetera.

### 4. Compost

Although Lange admits composting will not solve all your organic gardening problems, the plant/manure/dirt mixture of compost makes a nice plant food. Chemicals used in conventional gardening are like coffee, he says—they make plants grow but strip them of nutrients. Compost contains nutrients that will feed the soil and your crop.

If you're weary of composting because of the smell, he says, don't be. An ammonia smell means the pile has too much nitrogen, so add straw, dirt or other "browns" to the mix.

### 5. Raised Beds

Especially in areas similar to Kentucky with heavy seasonal rains, raised beds help to keep plants from flooding and allow for drainage. This means you can cultivate soon because of drier dirt. He recommends organic gardeners raise beds 1 to 1½ feet high.

### 6. Row Covers

For organic gardeners seeking a profit (especially those in colder climates), waiting until May for warm weather seems financially unreasonable. To work with the cold, Lange secures two layers of tobacco cloth over a hoop to cover his crops starting in late February or early March. He removes one of the layers in mid-April when things heat up but plants still need protection.



7. Sand  
Lange covers the soil around each plant with at least 1/2 inch of sand. This facilitates aeration to loosen soil and holds in moisture like mulch.