



Spruce Cottage Farm's

Periodic Newsletter

March 24th, 2016

Greetings Gardeners,

Snow buntings, warm yellow sunshine and snow fleas: sure signs that spring is on its way the mild weather certainly helps with that notion too! Every season is different and it is hard to predict what is going to happen. Will the mild early spring equal a wonderful growing season or will we get all our warm weather in May and have a cool summer? Who knows?! We can only start the season with optimism (and healthy, robust transplants!) and go from there.

The vernal equinox (a bi-annual occurrence where the lengths of day and night are equal) was yesterday and we are officially in a new season. My thoughts are turning to the garden to come and back to the basics of organic gardening. It never hurts to remind oneself of knowledge already learned; I find it often helps augment and clarify new knowledge.

Organic gardening looks at the way plants grow in nature, with its cycles of growth and decay, its diversity and its strife; instead of interrupting or breaking these cycles, organic gardeners attempt to manage these cycles to create healthy and

vibrant gardens. Organic gardeners use a number of principles to enhance and complement the natural cycles of the garden - check out the list below for the principles and how to apply them to your garden.

1. Feed the Soil!

This is the most important principle of organic gardening. Without healthy soil, we won't have healthy gardens. When we 'feed our soil' we are essentially feeding the soil food web. This food web consists of many different organisms, from microscopic bacteria and fungi to tangible earthworms and beetles. All of these organisms work together to break down organic matter into the nutrients that all plants require to grow and thrive. Feeding the soil means adding organic matter to the soil, in the form of amendments such as compost, aged manures and aged leaves. These amendments are applied by mulching ~ laying the amendment right on top of the soil. Cover crops or green manures are another soil management technique. An annual crop, such as buckwheat, is grown until it starts to flower. It is then cut down and turned into the soil, adding a super-dollop of organic matter for the soil's microbes. A final soil management technique at our disposal is the rotation of annual vegetable crops. This means not planting the same crop in the same place year after year. By rotating crops, soils are not depleted of the nutrients required by a particular crop and any disease cycles are broken. In some cases, certain crops such as peas and beans, add nutrients back to the soil with the help of nitrogen fixing bacteria.

2. Observe!

Observation is an integral principle in the organic gardener's bag of tricks. By taking a moment to walk around the garden and really look allows us to catch any issues before they become problems. It also gives us a chance to admire and enjoy our hard work! As you are walking around, keep your eyes peeled for things that look out of place. "Is that leaf supposed to be yellow?"; "Is that flower bud drooping?"; "Why has that plant not grown at all?" There are often simple solutions to the questions that might come up: 'Oh, that leaf is old and needs to be removed or the whole group of plants have yellow leaves - do I have a nitrogen deficiency?'; 'That bud is drooping and the soil is dry - time to water! or there is a small colony of aphids sucking the juice out of that bud - time to start squishing!'; 'Oh look - I've planted a sun loving tomato in a shady corner of the greenhouse - no wonder it's not growing!'

By taking the time to tune into the garden, we are allowing the garden to tune into us; what better way to figure out what might be going right or going wrong?

3. Encourage Diversity!

Gardens rich in diversity promote healthy ecosystems. One rarely finds monocrops in nature. Even a meadow that appears to be the same grass is made up of many different grasses. A diverse planting creates pockets of plants with different heights, different blooming times, different nectar and pollen amounts and

other intangible properties. These differences provide habitat and food for beneficial insects and soil-dwelling organisms. They create shade in places and bright sun in others. Perhaps one group of plants act as a trap crop for pests. Consider creating a perennial border alongside the vegetable garden. Perennials provide food and shelter before annuals mature and after annuals are finished. Diverse plantings also play a role in soil management - the more varied a planting, the less likely soils will develop nutrient deficiencies.

4. Write it Down!

A yearly garden record allows the organic gardener the opportunity to record what happened in the garden that season. This comes in handy the next year when one is racking one's brain, trying to recall what was planted where, why this section of the garden didn't do well or what did spectacularly well (and why!). A garden record can be as simple or complex as the gardener would like. A few sheets of paper clipped to a clipboard (with a pencil or pen attached!) and left in the shed or greenhouse is an easy method of garden record keeping. A map of the garden can be drawn and crops added as they are planted. Write the date of seeding or transplanting down too, as a reference for the next year. As the plants mature and are harvested, or at the end of the season, use a different coloured ink to write down how the crop did or didn't do and anything you might do differently next year. The different coloured ink makes reading the map easier the next season. Records can be created for the compost pile, the perennial border or the fruits and shrubs

too (oh yeah, I added seaweed two years ago, not last year!) At the end of the season the sheets can be stapled together and filed for the next season. The record also comes in handy in the winter, when planning the new season's garden. One is able to refer back to see which varieties did (or didn't do) well and plan one's seed order accordingly. For crop rotation planning, a garden record is a must, unless one has the memory of an elephant!

The above principles are a good guideline to start gardening organically. Of course, everyone's garden is unique. Some gardens may need a boost of fertilizer to bring them into balance and for some people, adding soil amendments is not an option: this is where naturally-sourced fertilizers come in - more on that next month!

The 2016 Plant List and Order Form is now available: on the website (sprucecottagefarm.com) or by calling me (335-9769)! The Plant Nursery will also be open for retail sales on the weekends in May and June - watch for posters announcing the opening day! You'll also find me at the Junction Community Market. I've got a full selection of healthy plant starts to get your garden growing.

In growing harmony,

Jolene Billwiller

~ Gardening Maven ~



jolene@sprucecottagefarm.com

www.sprucecottagefarm.com

1 (867) 335-9769

P.O. Box 5498
Haines Junction, YT
Y0B 1L0