

FOOD GARDENING NEW YEAR RESOLUTIONS

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Combining good planning with sustainable food gardening practices are New Year resolutions from which we can benefit exponentially.

1. Keep a garden journal.

Whether using an online journal or a physical record, keeping a journal is an important step to learning from successes and failures, and improving future food gardening experiences. Record crops/varieties, planting dates, conditions impacting crop growth and health (e.g., pests, frost dates, weather patterns, irrigation, soil amendments, etc.), harvest dates, yields and taste. When a crop has not been grown before, research and record information for successful growth. Keep track of crop rotation to reduce disease. If plants are started from seed, keep track of dates (seeding, up-potting, hardening off and transplanting) so that optimum timing can be honed. These activities will help us attain a sustainable gardening goal: to plant the right crop, in the right place, at the right time.

2. Practice minimum soil disturbance.

Sometimes called “no till,” minimum soil disturbance encourages robust life underground that includes microorganisms essential to plant nutrition and health. In addition, untilled soil better retains water and acts as a carbon “sink” (vs. tilling which releases greenhouse gases into the atmosphere).

3. Use organic matter.

Adding compost improves soil structure, promotes water retention and supports the microorganisms living in the soil. The saying is true: feed the soil and the soil will feed you. A brand new garden may require a one-time incorporation of large amount of organic matter to improve the soil structure. After that, renew soil nutrition by laying one to two inches of compost on top of the soil once or twice a year. No need to till—irrigation, rain, soil organisms, winter heaving of the earth, etc. will take care of that. If you grow heavy feeders, side-dress with compost during the growing season or amend the soil with composted manure weeks before planting.

4. Apply mulch.

Mulch protects the soil from erosion, conserves water by reducing evaporation and reduces weeds. It also helps reduce soil splash that can transfer soil diseases to crops. Use an organic mulch that will not mat and restrict the flow of water. An alternative to covering a fallow bed with mulch is to plant a cover crop that returns nutrients to the soil in addition to protecting it.

5. Add drip irrigation

Drip irrigation is the most efficient application of water to crops. Its output is measured and direct. On average, soil loses two inches of water a week during the hot, dry Sonoma County summer. Our task is to replace water loss in a manner that makes it available to our crops' active root zones (most active root zones are in the top 3 to 8 inches of soil; deeper for some crops, like tomatoes). Whether watering by hand or drip, always check soil moisture before irrigating.

6. Add plants to attract beneficials.

Attracting beneficials is just one aspect of integrated pest management but it is a highly important one when growing an organic food garden. The good bugs will keep the population of bad bugs to a manageable level without the use of toxic pesticides. Choose plants that provide pollen, nectar and

shelter. Blooms that attract pollinators promote an abundant harvest. Avoid pesticides that kill good bugs.

7. Practice integrated pest management (IPM).

Use the least toxic form of pest management available. This means practicing prevention such as crop rotation to prevent build-up of soil disease or clean-up of diseased plant materials to prevent overwintering insect pests. It means using mechanical controls such as row covers to exclude pests from seedlings as well as using traps to capture snails or using a strong spray of water to rid a plant of aphids. It means planting flowers (and/or allowing some crops and herbs to flower) that attract good bugs. It means using safe biological controls when necessary. It means using mulch to reduce weeds and to hand weed when necessary. Weeds compete with our crops for sun, space, nutrients and water. And many harbor vegetable pests.

8. Avoid pesticides, herbicides and synthetic fertilizers.

Most gardeners avoid pesticides and herbicides for our own health (especially when growing edibles) and the health of beneficial insects and pollinators. On the other hand, synthetic fertilizers may be a quick-fix temptation. The soil is not being improved and fed using synthetics. Over time, the application of synthetic fertilizers will discourage a population of soil organisms that make nutrients available to plants as well as promoting overall crop health. For most crops and almost all Sonoma County soils, adding good-quality compost is all that is needed.

For more information:

- [Sustainable Food Gardening](#)
 - [Nurture and Protect the Soil](#)
 - [Conserve Water](#)
 - [Food Gardening with Less Water](#)
 - [No Till Food Gardening](#)
 - [Gardening for Beneficial Insects](#)
 - [Plants for Beneficial Insects](#)
 - [Integrated Pest Management for the Home Garden](#)
- Garden Journal/Planning
 - [Personal Vegetable Calendar](#)
 - [First and Last Average Frost Dates for Sonoma County](#)
 - [Succession Gardening](#)
 - [Planning the Fall and Winter Vegetable Garden](#)
 - [Choosing Vegetable Varieties](#)
 - [Year-Round Food Gardening in Sonoma County](#)
 - [Vegetable Seed Sources](#)