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Inside This Issue

Organic Gardening	1
Organic Gardening	2
Compost Do's & Don'ts . 3	
Veggie Favorites	4
Library Presentations. . . .	5



The Lake County Mission Statement

The Mission of the UF/IFAS Mater Gardener Volunteers is to assist extension agents by providing horticultural education programs and current research-based information to the public through plant clinics, community outreach, and through Discovery Gardens.

GARDEN SCOOP

Organic Gardening

BY – Karen Kennen, MGv

Organic gardening officially came into being in Florida in 2001 when the state organization, Florida Organic Growers (FOG) received accreditation enabling it to certify farms as organic. The number of certified organic farms in Florida is 134 as of the 2022 USDA agricultural survey. Attaining that certification takes a while since the acreage must have had no prohibited substances, like synthetic fertilizers, used for three years. These 134 farms do not use any synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, sewage sludge, or genetically engineered seeds (GMOs) or plants.

Without synthetics the organic gardener has some options. For fertilizers, the organic gardener focuses on the health of the soil because with healthy soil, you have healthy plants. Soil health can be attained by adding compost, fish emulsion, manures, and fava beans as a cover crop. When dealing with pests, it is essential to use IPM or individual pest management where gardens are frequently monitored for pests and taken care of immediately by hand removal of harmful insects or ensuring natural enemies of these pests are present and controlling them. It could be as simple as using collars around plants to create a barrier against cutworms. Some plants, such as marigolds, can be used to repel pests from tomato and basil plants. To rid plants of soft-bodied pests, it is okay to use insecticidal soap spray.

Besides maintaining healthy soil and plants without using insecticides and pesticides, an organic gardener must also think about using seeds and plants that are organic and do not have GMO. Organic seeds are taken from plants that are grown following the organic gardening guidelines. They have not been genetically modified or engineered. The GMOs are usually not available to home growers but are used by commercial farmers to increase crop production. Such as DNA developed to have herbicide resistance so

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farmers can spray for weeds without hurting their crops. Home gardeners can find organic seeds or plants at many online sites or in stores but be sure it states they are organic and/or non-GMO. This certifies that the plant or seeds are grown on farms that adhere to organic growing practices of using no synthetics fertilizers or pesticides. They can be found at many local garden centers; at websites specializing in organics; at some farmer's market but be sure they are USDA certified.



Just like a commercial grower, a home gardener can raise organic crops which allows him to know the quality of their food; cycle resources; help with ecological balance; conserve biodiversity to name some of the benefits of organic gardening. There are at least seven things for them to practice when attempting to grow organically.

First, focus on the soil. Achieve a healthy soil by adding composted material ideally that has been composted by you. Try growing cover crops like sun hemp and sorghum-sudangrass for summer, or varieties like perennial peanut can be used in other seasons.

Second, remember principle number one of the 9 Florida Friendly Principles is to plant your garden in the right place where there is adequate sun, healthy soil, correct temperatures, and readily available water. Right plant, right place also takes into consideration right time of year which considers the temperatures.

Third, be careful about the selection of your plants and seeds. They need to be certified as organic. Also, you can use seeds you have saved from your own plants.

Fourth, keep your plants healthy by keeping weeds pulled so there is no competition for nutrients.

Fifth, help prevent diseases by watering only in the morning or rotating the location of your crops so pests cannot be established in a certain site.

Sixth, manage pests with naturals like neem oil or insecticidal soap. You should check daily for pests or damage from disease so you can naturally take care of it immediately. Even clipping off a leaf of a plant that looks damaged can be a preventive measure.

RESOURCE: <http://sfyl.ifas.ufl.edu./lawn-and-garden/organic-gardening/>

Discovery Gardens

Please plan a visit to over twenty different gardens located at 1951 Woodlea Road in Tavares. The hours are Monday through Friday. Just like your yard, Discovery Garden changes with the seasons and will reveal something new with each visit. Come see the changes in the garden.

Composting

BY – Karen Kennen, MGV

Composting is a method of recycling items to produce a useful product in a home garden. Compost is added to a garden to improve the soil quality, enhance water retention, add nutrients, and even establish microbial activity.

Location of a compost area or bin is important. Locate it in an area that is easy to access. Also, having it near a water source is helpful. Consider keeping it away from the home in case you are worried about attracting pests which can be avoided if properly managed and by using a covered bin. Have the compost bin at least 3 x 3 x 3 with a cover. Be sure to keep the contents about as moist as a wet sponge so that too much wetness will not attract insects that can be bothersome. Another way to prevent pests is to keep a brown layer over veggie and fruit scraps. Turning the compost regularly can help deter introduction of pests into the composting matter.



The brown layer in a compost can consist of cardboard, leaves, twigs, and shredded paper. This will provide rich carbon ingredients in the compost. The green layer can be made up of fresh grass cuttings, plant cuttings, fruit scraps, vegetable scraps, and tea leaves.

It is also important to know what not to add to a compost pile. Some items will not compost and can sour your pile making it unusable in your garden. Do not add any meat or bone scraps or dairy products because they attract pests and cause awful odors. Do not add pet waste because it can create bacteria and pathogens. No glossy or coated paper since it will not compost. Also do not add any non-biodegradable products such as plastic or glass.

The process of composting occurs properly with the layering of brown and green material; some say like layering a lasagna. Try to achieve three parts of brown to one part of green for the most efficient and timely composting. You can also chop up leaves and twigs to encourage faster composting. Remember to add water to the pile to be sure it stays as moist as a wrung out wet sponge. If it gets too wet, mix the pile up with a pitchfork and add some more brown material.



RESOURCE:

<https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/care/fertilizer/compost/>

BROCCOLI

BY – Karen Kennen, MGV

There is still time to plant a cool weather vegetable that many gardeners enjoy cooked or raw. Broccoli is easy to grow. First, be sure to try any of the varieties recommended by UF/IFAS. The harvest time for each of them is important so you can know when to expect to have some broccoli to eat. If

you don't want to wait too long, try planting Early Dividend. The deep green head is smaller, only 4 inches, and can be harvested after transplanting in 45 days. It will also provide many side shoots after harvest for an extended crop. Pacman, another early harvest broccoli, can be ready in 55 to 60 days. It has a head that is about 8 inches and will also provide side shoots. Its mild flavor makes it perfect for eating raw. Another choice for earlier harvesting is DeCicco that will be ready in 50 to 85 days. This Italian heirloom variety has a full blue-green head of broccoli. The leaves of this broccoli can also be harvested and be eaten like collards.

Knowing when to harvest is important because if it is too early the likelihood of the plant developing side shoots is diminished and the plant has not developed its full nutritional potential yet. The head is ready when the buds are green and tight. Use sharp scissors or a knife. Cut at a 45-degree angle on the stalk about 3 -5 inches below the head. The angle cut will help prevent rot because water will run off the angle and it will allow side shoots a better chance to develop.

RESOURCES:

Broccoli: <https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/edibles/vegetables/broccoli/>

Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide - <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/VH021>



Grow Joy - Photo



An Equal Opportunity Institution. UF/IFAS Extension, University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, Andra Johnson, Dean. Single copies of UF/IFAS Extension publications (excluding 4-H and youth publications) are available free to Florida residents from county UF/IFAS Extension offices.

Upcoming Library Presentations

Lake County MGVs will be presenting a series of 6 different topics in 2026. Check your preferred library to see the day reserved for the presentation. Libraries in -Tavares, Eustis, Leesburg, Groveland, Umatilla, and Clermont.

MARCH - Petscaping is a relatively new term used to describe the method of gardening with pets in mind. Learn about plants that do not cause harm to your pets. Learn about protecting favorite plants from pets. Learn about having special areas of the landscape for your pets. Landscape to have a garden you love and a place your pets will be safe and happy.

APRIL - Caladiums are tropical and colorful tubers that can be grown in Lake County with our temperate weather. Learn about the two basic types of caladiums. Some questions that will be answered are - when can I plant caladiums; how do I plant caladiums; do I dig the tuber up every fall; how many colors are caladiums? Find out how versatile this plant can be in your landscape.

MAY - Hurricanes are a part of Florida living and there are certain things that should be done when protecting and preparing your landscape for upcoming storms. When the storm has passed, it is also important to assess your landscape and perform gardening tasks to ensure your plants recover from the storm. This presentation will show you what to do for your plants before and after a hurricane.

SEPTEMBER - Hydroponics is a method of growing plants in a water based nutrient solution rather than soil. This presentation is for beginners and focuses on the least expensive and easiest method to use. There will be no electricity used to circulate the solution which simplifies the method and keeps the costs low.

OCTOBER - Citrus in the home landscape is possible now that the University of Florida has found resistant varieties of citrus that the homeowner can grow. You will be introduced to a orange tree variety that can tolerate citrus greening along with grapefruit, lemon, and lime varieties that are also tolerant of citrus greening disease.

NOVEMBER - Freezes can happen in Florida and knowing how to prepare for them and what to do with your damaged plants is important. This presentation explains the difference between frost, freeze, and hard freeze and how each can affect your plants. You will also learn what to do to protect your plants from cold temperatures.

MT. Dora Library Topics

Saturday, February 21, 2026 at 2:00pm
Sunday, March 1, 2026 at 2:00pm
Sunday, April 12, 2026 at 2:00pm
Sunday, May 3, 2026 at 2:00pm
Sunday, July 1, 2026 at 2:00pm
Sunday, September 6, 2026 at 2:00pm
October 11, 2026 at 2:00pm
November 8, 2026 at 2:00 pm

Orchid Care
Hydrangeas, Azaleas & Roses
Caladiums & Other Bulb and Tubers
Bromeliads
Succulents
Hydroponics
Terrariums
Holiday Plants