

Welcome to Gardenerd.com!

Thanks for your interest in Gardenerd.com, the ultimate resource for garden nerds! This is the place to find tips, tidbits, and resources for more tips and tidbits all year long. You can submit a gardening question to the Gardenerd – Christy Wilhelmi – and share your own ideas with other readers.

Now, what do you really want? Oodles of flowers? Bushels of produce? Do you want a more harmonious, healthy garden? Do you want to solve pest problems? Do you want to enjoy the fruits of your labor without too much effort? Do you strive to create a vibrant garden that makes a statement about who you are? As a new gardener I wanted all of these things. The trouble was that I had only an apartment balcony on which to fulfill my dreams. That was just the beginning of my pursuit of happiness through gardening. Not just any gardening, organic gardening. I began to read everything I could get my hands on, plotted out my plans for the perfect organic garden. I found ways to plant in small spaces, growing just as much as some friends could in their big backyards. I moved to Los Angeles, California and discovered the wonders of community gardening.

I learned about composting, mulching, green manures and cover crops, French Intensive, Bio-intensive, double digging, heirloom varieties... you name it, I soaked it up like a sponge. The more I searched, the more I learned how gardening, and on a larger scale – farming, affects the world we live in from the ground up. From how we treat our soil to how we ship our harvests, the impact

on our little planet is far greater than one might think. I was already a closet environmentalist, but as I delved more deeply into the world of organic gardening, I saw the threads that link everything together: healthy soil = nutritious plants = healthier bodies (we are at the top of the food chain after all). Growing uncommon varieties = biodiversity = a healthier ecosystem. I began to think of my garden as an experimental "miniature microcosm" of the world I want to live in. As Gandhi said, "be the change you want to see in the world." Gardening suddenly became much more than just gardening. It was a mission to make the world a better place.

In my quest to know everything (as unrealistic a goal as it may be), I ended up gathering quite an arsenal of information and resources. It seemed like every time someone would ask me a gardening question I would know where to send him or her for the answer. That is how Gardenerd.com was born. So, what you will find on these pages are the Top 5 Tips for Successful Organic Gardening that have provoked a common response when I share them: "huh, what a great idea. I never knew that."

And now, without further adieu...

Christy's Top 5 Successful Organic Gardening Tips

Whether you are new to organic gardening, or you have been around the flowerbed a few times, you'll find these time-tested tips helpful in your garden.

Tip #1: Emulsion is Your Friend

Be it fish or kelp emulsion, this stuff works! When planting from seed, use emulsion daily for the first week to keep your seed bed moist, then weekly until the plant reaches maturity. Its broad spectrum of minerals helps strengthen the plants against pests and diseases, encourages leaf growth and generally boosts the well being of the plant. Simply dilute fish or kelp emulsion with water according to package directions and apply to the base of plants.

Emulsion can also be used as a foliar feeder and sprayed on citrus (they love it!).

I recommend a sprayer that attaches directly to your garden hose and requires no mixing. Just pour the emulsion concentrate into the sprayer, set the dial according to directions and douse your citrus trees with the mixture. You'll see stronger plants in no time. Emulsion is not a replacement for fertilizer, but an additional supplement you won't want to do without.

Gardenerd.com recommends:

[Kelp Spray](#) – Seaweed spray from Garden's Alive for healthy plants

[Neptune's Harvest](#) - a blend of hydrolyzed fish and kelp emulsion

Tip #2: Save \$\$ - Make Your Own Cloche

Nothing keeps your direct-seeded babies safer from bugs and cold better than their own mini greenhouse – the cloche (it's a French word, pronounced *closh* as in *clothes*). However, glass cloches can be prohibitively expensive, and often do nothing to protect plants from cutworms. A simple solution that also happens to be good for the environment is to make mini cloches from your used plastic water bottles. That's right – don't throw away those Evian and Arrowhead water bottles, turn them into mini greenhouses for your garden. Here's how: Remove the cap and ring from each bottle and lay the bottle down horizontally. With a sharp box-cutter or mat knife on a solid surface, cut the bottle in half by inserting the knife and working your way around the bottle, rotating away from you as you go. When you are done, you will have two halves. (For taller seedlings like green onions or carrots, just cut the bottoms off your bottles and you will have tall cloches in an instant.) The top half is ready to use right away, the bottom half needs one more thing – a ventilation hole. Turn the bottom half of the bottle upside down so the bottom is facing up. Insert the knife into the top surface and cut out a flap or triangle. Now your plants can get some air and you will be able to water directly through the cloche.

In your garden, use cloches to cover your seedlings as they emerge from the soil. Push the cloche down into the soil with a twist to create a barrier around the plant both above and below ground. This will keep all sorts of pests at bay: sow bugs (rolly polly bugs), cutworms, snails, slugs and grasshoppers. When

plants have 2 sets of true leaves, remove the cloches. When the cloches lose their shape, toss them in the recycling bin. Making your own cloches will increase your success rate when direct seeding, so you will use less seed to begin with. Save money, save seeds, save the environment.

Gardenerd.com recommends:

8 oz. bottles for small plants (lettuces, green onions, flowers)

1 liter bottles for wider plants (zucchini and other squash)

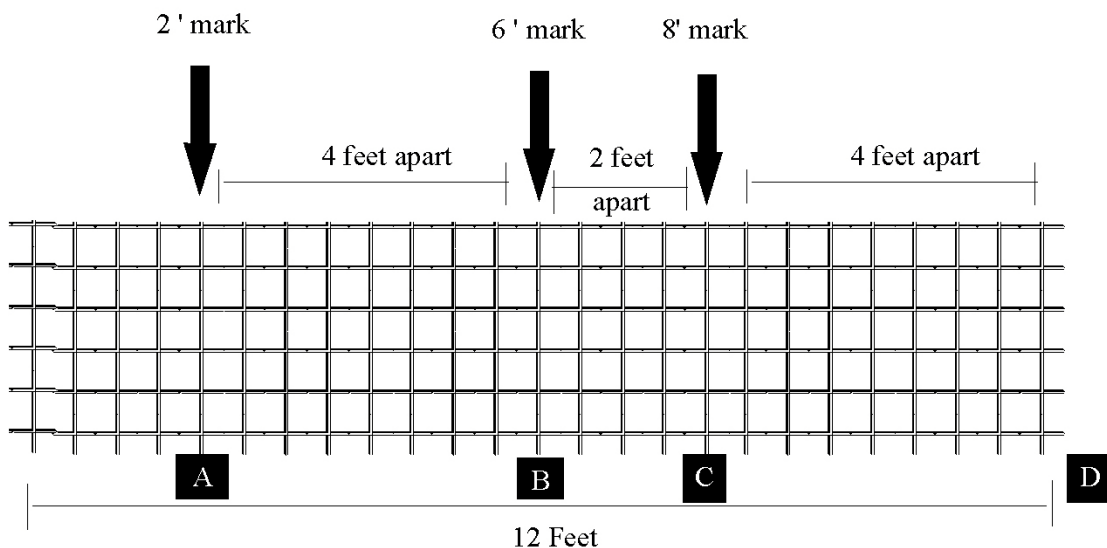
Tip #3: Tomato Crib and Epsom salts

What the heck is a tomato crib, you ask? Well, for starters, it involves breaking a rule – or commonly held belief – about tomato growing. Most nurseries and gardening books will tell you that you have to space tomato plants 2-3 feet apart. This tomato crib allows you to grow 8 different varieties of tomatoes in 8 square feet of space, without wrestling with round, weak tomato cages. If you prepare your soil correctly, you will have a bounty of tomatoes that will have your neighbors either welcoming or dreading your approach up the driveway (depending on how much they like tomatoes). After you've prepared your soil for planting (mixing in organic fertilizer for acid loving plants, and plenty of compost because tomatoes are considered "heavy feeders," meaning they need a lot of nutrients to draw upon), follow these instructions:

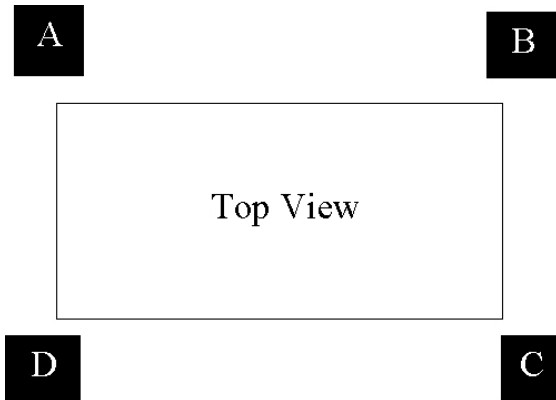
First, mark out an area 2 feet wide, by 4 feet long and divide the space into 8 square feet. Mark the center of each square foot. Dig a hole for each tomato

plant that is twice as deep as the root ball. Snip or pinch off all the leaves from the base of the plant up to the level that is equal to a few inches above the surface of the hole you just dug. This will accomplish 2 things: deep roots mean strong plants, and trimming the leaves will keep water and soil from accumulating on your plant. Next, throw a handful of Epsom Salts in each hole. This will help prevent blossom-end rot, a nasty disease that ruins otherwise perfectly good tomatoes, come harvest time. Mix that in a little and plant your tomato, backfilling it gently (don't push down, let watering do the work for you, then you can add more soil).

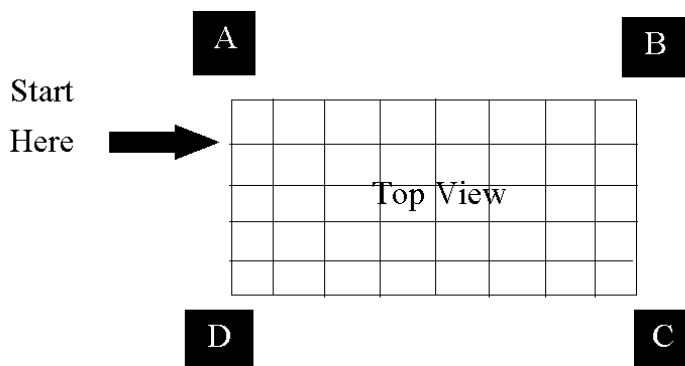
Second, once your tomatoes are planted, you will need a 12' length of heavy duty wire fencing (the kind that stands up on its own) that is 4' tall, with generous 6"– 8" grid spacing so you can get your hands through when harvesting. Make a 2'x 4' box by making a 90-degree fold in the fencing at the 2' mark, the 6' mark and the 8' mark. See the diagram below:



Connect the ends of the fencing together to form the box and tie them together with wire.



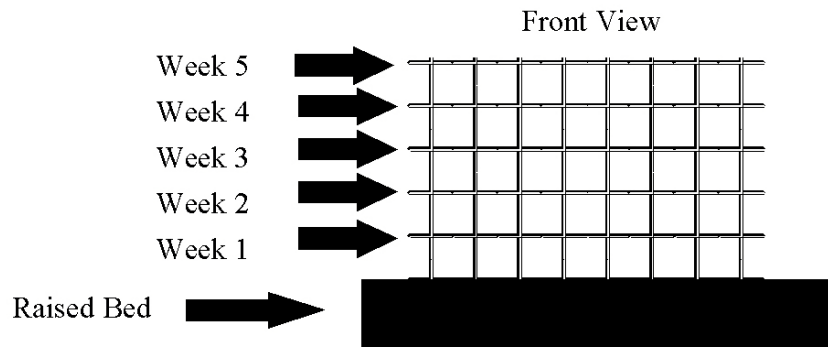
Use wire cutters to cut the horizontals off the bottom row of fencing to expose vertical spikes that drive into the ground, or don't – you can also use U-pins to secure the fencing box in place. Now you have a crib to put around your tomatoes. Position the box over your tomatoes and watch them grow. You're almost done...



As your tomatoes grow taller, weave sturdy twine across the opening of the box to create a grid for the tomatoes to grow

through (See left diagram). Start by tying off the string near a corner and run the twine across the cage to wrap it around the other end of the wire fencing. Then take the twine to the next rung, wrap it once around the fencing and continue across to the other side. Continue until you've completed the grid.

Start near the bottom and work your way up. Usually you will want to add a new



layer of twine per week as the tomatoes grow through the lower layers of twine. It only takes a few minutes to add a new layer. Within about a month, you will have created a 3 dimensional lattice that cradles your tomato vines, and you won't have to worry about them for the rest of the summer.

Gardenerd recommends:

Amazon.com – [Green Twine - it's good stuff!](#)

Tip #4: Grow a Cover Crop – Mulch it with your mower

One of the best ways to condition soil is to do nothing, or practically nothing, in fall or winter (in warmer climates). Plant a cover crop, also known as green manure, and let it grow all season. In late winter or early spring, cut it down and turn it under. Cover it with compost and water it in, then again – do nothing. In about 3 weeks you'll have loamy, nutrient-rich soil that's ready for spring planting. Why plant a cover crop, and while we're at it, what is a cover crop anyway?

Let's address the second question first. A cover crop is made up of grains, grasses and legumes like fava beans, hairy vetch, peas, clover, rye, wheat and

such that do a number of things, depending on what you plant. Some cover crops deposit nitrogen in the soil, some help provide a home for beneficial insects, others help prevent soil erosion.

So now to answer the first question: *Why plant a cover crop?* Some of the answers are mentioned above – they help prevent erosion, attract beneficial insects, and fix nitrogen in the soil. They also increase healthy microbial activity, create a loamy soil structure, increase nutrient availability, and maybe the most important benefit – they help break up clay soils.

To utilize a cover crop in your garden, choose a seed mix based on your garden's needs (See *Gardenerd recommends* below) and plant in rows about 5 inches apart. Water regularly, then sit back and watch it grow. When about half the crop is flowering, it's time to cut it down and turn it under. You can do that one of two ways: simply dig or pull the crop out, lay the stalks down and bury them with about 3 to 6 inches compost. Or to speed things up, cut the stalks just above ground, lay them in a pile and run over them with your lawn mower to shred them (that is, if you don't own a shredder). It works great! Position your mower near a barrier, such as a wall or fence, to catch the shredded material. Then spread the shredded cover crop over your garden and cover it with compost. Water regularly if it's not raining, and wait 2-3 weeks. Turn the crop into the ground and let it breakdown another week if you still see large pieces in

the mix. By the time you've planned your spring garden, your soil will be ready and waiting for you, full of nutrients, healthy organisms and vitality.

Gardenerd recommends:

GrowOrganic.com – [View their Cover Crop seed collection](#)

BountifulGardens.org – [View their vast selection of Compost Crop seeds](#)

Tip #5: Coffee Grounds for Perky Plants

By now you may have noticed that a lot of attention is given to soil preparation in organic gardening. After all, the philosophy behind growing organically is, “healthy soil equals healthy, vigorous plants.” If the plant gets everything it needs from nutrient-rich soil, it will outgrow most pests and diseases. One more way that you can increase your soil's vitality is by adding spent coffee grounds. Coffee grounds are slightly acidic, so your acid-loving plants like tomatoes, hydrangeas and such will thrive when this black gold is sprinkled evenly around the base of each plant. Also, dig coffee grounds in at soil preparation time in spring and fall to add a good source of nitrogen into the mix. Alternatively, you can add coffee grounds to your compost pile along with grass clippings, kitchen vegetable scraps and other green materials.

You can obtain spent coffee grounds from many coffee shops around the country. In fact, some places even advertise a free bag of used coffee grounds when you buy a cup-a-Joe (see Gardenerd Recommends below). You can, of course, drink a lot of coffee at home and add the grounds to your garden

without ever having to travel. However, most coffee shops have an abundant supply that they are more than happy to part with. I highly recommend locating an organic coffee shop in your area, or at least a café that offers an organic coffee on the menu. The more you can support organic and sustainable farming practices, the better the world - and your garden - shall be. So, take advantage of this free resource to add nutrients to your garden while closing the loop on something that would otherwise be thrown away.

Gardenerd recommends:

[Equal Exchange Organic Coffee](#) – and Amazon.com has plenty of other organic coffees to choose from too. Ask your local coffee house to carry organic!

So, are you ready to get growin'?

Be sure to return to <http://www.gardenerd.com/> for information, interesting topics, guest writers, Gardenerd paraphernalia, and much, much more. I look forward to growing magical gardens with you.

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