

Best Practices for Health in the Garden

Conservation practices are the best way to minimize issues and increase yield

The garden is the perfect place to practice conservation. Conservation practices are ways of protecting and enhancing soil, water, and ecological health. Implementing conservation practices keeps your garden happy, healthy, promotes sustainability, improves yields, and mitigates pest and disease. It can also save you money and time.

In many cases, a healthier garden can save money, time, and minimize pest or disease issue.

1.) Cover Cropping

Cover cropping has many benefits for the soil in the garden. It can:

- 1) Provide organic matter and add carbon to the soil
- 2) Protect against soil erosion from wind and water
- 3) Improve nutrient density by adding nitrogen or making other nutrients like phosphorous more available for vegetable plants
- 4) Improve soil porosity and tilth
- 5) Provides beneficial insect habitat that prey on pests
- 6) Increase biodiversity
- 7) Help water retention
- 8) Can improve aesthetics
- 9) Suppresses weeds by chemical means or as a living/dead mulch



[Click here to learn more about cover cropping in greater depth.](https://goo.gl/rb4qhX) (https://goo.gl/rb4qhX).

2.) Crop Rotation

Crop rotation is the methodical seasonal rotation of crops in the garden. For example, planting tomatoes in one bed would be planted with lettuce or cabbage the following season. This helps limit nutrient deficiencies and soil borne pathogens from developing in unhealthy ways. In short, crop rotation improves soil health and increases disease resilience by ensuring there is a healthy and balanced nutrient profile.

Learn more: [Plant Rotation in the Garden based on Families](https://goo.gl/8TvGKJ) (https://goo.gl/8TvGKJ).

3.) No-till Gardening

No-till gardening is a way of growing vegetables without tilling. This practice has many benefits including improved water infiltration, organic matter retention, reduction in soil erosion, and improves cycling of nutrients in the soil. No-till also allows for the natural and necessary soil microbiome and biology to remain undisturbed, making the soil in your garden more resilient. No-till gardening is often coupled with the practice of cover cropping as many cover crops assist in creating more tilth in the soil.

Learn more: [No-till gardening](https://goo.gl/Tdncuk) (<https://goo.gl/Tdncuk>).

4.) Rainwater Storage

Storing rainwater, whether through a cistern or traditional rain barrel, has many benefits. First, many farmers prefer rainwater over groundwater or water from a utility as it contains less minerals and contains forms of nitrogen that plants can readily use. Second, storing rainwater decreases peak loads on utility infrastructure and can decrease utility bills. Third, in the case of heavy rains, collecting rainwater can limit runoff and soil water erosion.

There are simple and complex ways of storing water depending on your needs.

[Learn more by following this link to get started](https://goo.gl/1raFhd) (<https://goo.gl/1raFhd>).

5.) Composting

All organic material will decompose into humus. Humus is the dark and crumbly topsoil you see in many gardens. Composting assists decomposition to create a nutrient dense humus. Humus is crucial for healthy vegetables. It holds a dense array of nutrients, is the most biologically active part of the soil, and retains water.

By composting, you are reducing waste and harnessing nutrient dense material that can support your garden. Composting can be simple or more complex. [To learn more follow this link](https://goo.gl/mSnUcH) (<https://goo.gl/mSnUcH>).

You can also buy compost. Follow this link to learn more (<https://goo.gl/AwcKo6>).

6.) Beneficial Insect Habitat Creation

The Xerces Society estimates that only 2% of all insect species are pests. The remaining 98% of species are beneficial. Unfortunately, due to habitat loss, fragmentation, and other causes, observations and research indicate a dramatic decline in all insect populations. Because insects are vital in the garden (e.g. pollination, pest control, nutrient cycling) and our biosphere, creating habitat for beneficial insects is critical. Therefore, providing space in the garden for insects to overwinter is a key conservation practice.

To learn more about creating beneficial insect habitat, [click here](https://goo.gl/ABm6AH) (<https://goo.gl/ABm6AH>). To learn more about preparing your garden for winter while keeping insects in mind, [click here](https://goo.gl/ogCZHw) (<https://goo.gl/ogCZHw>).



7.) Mulching

Mulch can be synthetic (e.g. plastic) or organic. In this instance, we are talking about organic mulch. Organic mulch retains moisture, suppresses weeds, decomposes into humus (see "Composting" above), and can serve as overwintering sites for beneficial insects.

Not all mulches are the same, however. Softer mulch, like straw, grass clippings (from untreated lawn), etc. take very little nitrogen to break down which leaves other resources for your vegetables. Harder mulch, like wood chips, can bind up nitrogen and microbes, therefore limiting resources for your vegetables. Cover crops, like clover, rye, or oats, are an excellent source of mulch.