

Take the Organic Gardening Path

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Heide Hermary, president of the Society of Organic Urban Land Care Professionals (S.O.U.L.) says plants need healthy soil, not chemical supplements

One of the founders of the Victoria-based Society of Organic Urban Land Care Professionals tells the *Weekend Edition* why organic is the only way to go.

Joanna Drewry
Weekend Edition contributor

Victoria, long been celebrated as a “City of Gardens”. Is home to a dedicated group of gardeners who want to put the city in the vanguard of the world-wide organic gardening movement.

Heide Hermary, president of S.O.U.L. (Society of Organic Urban Land Care Professionals), which started in Victoria a year ago, recently shared some advice for home gardeners who want to adopt organic gardening methods.

“Organic gardening is simply learning to work with nature instead of against it. For millions of years plants evolved without chemical fertilizers and pesticides. They don’t need them,” she says. “But what they do need is healthy soil. By changing gardening practices to support healthy soil we are supporting the natural biological processes that created our beautiful planted in the first place.”

Hermary says that if you’ve been using non-organic fertilizers and pesticides in your garden, “going organic” requires a change in viewpoint of what these products do to the environment.

“We have used chemical fertilizers and pesticides because we think they are good. But their effects on the soil are like acid rain on lake – but worse,” she says. “These products kill the soil. By that I mean they kill the soil organisms that are essential to plant health.”

“We have forgotten that it isn’t fertilizer that feeds the plants. It’s the soil.”

Hermary argues that giving plants fertilizers that aren’t organically based is akin to a person trying to survive on vitamin pills without food.

She says that when we go into the garden and rake away the leaves and organic matter to put fertilizer down, we are actually short-circuiting the plants' nutrient cycle, adding that the soil itself is a living organism. It requires organic matter – compost or mulch – to feed the microbes that feed the plants. If the soil is fed properly, these microbes help to predigest the essential nutrients for the plants. Soil is not dead or inert; it is an active biological environment.

“In addition to providing fertilizer to the garden that is actually detrimental to plants, many people are continuing to use pesticides. The principal reason that plants get diseases is because they don't have the correct nutrition,” says Hermary. “Once plants are well fed, they are better able to resist disease. It's really just like human health – if the plant's immune system is built up thoroughly through good nutrition, it will be vigorous.”

Hermary says that for gardeners who want to switch over to organic methods, numerous organic products are on the market.

She says anything from the seas, whether fish or kelp, all have the full range of minerals plants need. Hermary says that if you're adding composted manure to a garden, you should also add in some glacial rock dust, adding that's available, for example, from Eddy's Wholesale or Le Coteau.

Why is glacial rock dust needed? Because manure is the waste product of an animal that has already digested plant material and extracted some of the minerals from it. This dust replenishes the lost minerals, explains Hermary.

“Manure is an excellent source of good organic nitrogen. You can also use an organic meal mixture that has been packaged for S.I.O.P.A. (South Island Organic Producers Association). This mix is guaranteed not to contain any genetically modified plant material.”

She says the reason it's important to use a product that doesn't contain genetically modified materials is because of the impact such material has on the environment.

Hermary speaks eloquently about the need for organic gardening because she was trained as a landscape horticulturist in the “traditional” method and has converted her own gardening practice, based on long study and a conviction that the organic approach is the only appropriate gardening method to use in this day and age. Which led to the start of S.O.U.L.

“A year ago a group of us here in Victoria formed S.O.U.L. and since then we have developed the first Canadian standard for organic horticulture.” She says, adding other at the start included Carolyn Herriot, owner of the Garden Path Nursery, and Michael Cowan, a CBC Radio garden commentator.

The group also now includes members from Eastern Canada as well.

S.O.U.L. has also developed an organic certification program for professional horticulturists and landscapers, together with a comprehensive on-line training course. (This is a long program, available at a cost of \$1,100) The Web site for S.O.U.L. is www.organiclandcare.org.

There is wide public demand for organic and sustainable gardening practice. In the landscape horticulture business the customers are generally demanding organic methods,” Hermary says.

“Frankly, it’s the horticulture industry that is the greatest barrier to the organic conversion. And this is simply because they have been trained in the old methods and don’t know how to do things differently,” she says. “Those of us who formed S.O.U.L. have found that we don’t need to persuade the homeowner or the public. We are reaching out to the landscape gardeners to help them learn different methods as many of the chemical that were available in the past are just no going to be there for them.

“We want to train the foremen, managers and crew leaders in the landscape industry because they are in positions to influence and lead change.” says Hermary.

“Organic gardening is such a simple concept, really. It’s all about working with nature and not against it, learning to understand nature and work with it rather than trying vainly to reinvent it.

“It’s the way we will all be gardening in 10 years time.”

Heide Hermary is a graduate of the landscape horticulture program at Kwantlen University College and is currently completing her Masters degree in Sustainable Agriculture through the University of Sydney, Australia. She developed and taught the master Gardener program at the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific

She will be giving introductory talks on organic gardening through CityGreen, on May 22, June 5 and June 19, from 7 – 9 p.m. at the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific, and next Sept. 10 at the Compost Center. In addition to her work as president of S.O.U.L., Hermary has a private landscape design and consultation practice. She can be reached at 853-6802