

MOTHER EARTH NEWS

82 Sustainable Gardening Tips

October/November 2011

<http://www.motherearthnews.com/organic-gardening/sustainable-gardening-zm0z11zsto.aspx>

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Composting, using poultry for pest control and reusing materials in the garden are just a few ways to make growing your own food more sustainable.

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WARD

Most gardeners have sustainability on their minds. After all, growing your own food is a huge step toward leading a sustainable lifestyle. Organic, chemical-free methods are inherently more sustainable — for human health, wildlife, the soil and the water supply — than non-organic techniques. But sustainable gardening goes beyond just using organic methods. From water and energy conservation to waste reduction and smart seed-sourcing, there are infinite ways we can make our practices more sustainable.

To find out what's going on in sustainable gardens across the United States and Canada, we surveyed the thousands of members of MOTHER's Garden Advisory Group. Here are their best tips, broken down by category, many of which will not only help you garden more sustainably, but will save you money, too! We hope you'll try these creative ideas in your garden and pass the tips along to your friends and neighbors. (To contribute tips to future articles, join our [Editorial Advisory Groups](#).)

Reusing and Recycling Materials in the Garden

1. I use an old plastic mesh bag to round up leftover slivers of soap. I rubber-band the bag so it's tight and hang it next to the hose. The combo of the slightly abrasive bag and the soap scrubs off garden dirt. — *Irene, Washington*
2. I make row covers out of tomato cages, old rebar I got free, and used blankets I got at the local thrift store. — *Cathy, Florida*
3. Instead of purchasing expensive weed-blocking landscape cloth, I use free old tarps from my local lumber store that they used to cover wood during shipping. — *David, Utah*
4. I gather pieces of concrete to use as stepping stones in my garden. — *Susan, Virginia*
5. I recycle drink cups to grow tomatoes from seed. When they're ready to transplant, I simply remove the bottom inch or so of each cup and plant directly in the ground. This prevents cutworms from making a meal of my transplants. — *S., California*
6. I was given some heavy-duty metal "for sale" sign frames, and I placed them in my raised beds to support bed covers in early spring. — *Kat, California*
7. Old pantyhose are my friends: They make garden ties, and I use them to "bag" cantaloupes growing on trellises so the melons have extra support. — *Donna, North Carolina*
8. I make all my garden fencing with scrap wood and build my veggie trellises and arbors with fallen branches and saplings. — *Irene, New Jersey*
9. My [plant tags are twigs](#) with a shaved-off area to write on. — *Michelle, New York*
10. For a cold frame in late winter, we [prop old windows against straw bales](#). When I know we're in danger of a frost, I take old bean poles and jab them into the ends of my beds, throw old sheets over them, use stones or bricks to hold down the edges, and voilà! I have a makeshift tent in my garden. — *Liz, Ohio*

Saving Water and Conserving Energy

11. I've come to discover that mulching heavily is a water-saving essential. It could be store-bought mulch, dead plant materials, chipped up pieces of trees, etc. Lately I've been using downed pine cones. After you start looking around, it's all you see. — *Cam, Colorado*

12. I make small ditches between my plant rows to funnel water right to the plants, and I have a cistern under my house that catches much of the rainwater my barrels can't. — *Pat, Missouri*

13. My husband got a laundry sink at a yard sale that we hook a hose to for cleaning vegetables outside. A bucket underneath saves the water (and nutrients from the soil) so we can put it back on the garden. — *Jeannemarie, Maryland*

14. I no longer drive to the gym or turn on exercise equipment as a couple of hours of “aerobic gardening” a day keep me in good shape. Thanks to working from home and eating from the garden, I can go a couple of weeks without turning on a car. — *Phil, Pennsylvania*

15. I conserve solar heat by enclosing my two parallel raised beds with hoop-style covers in spring and fall. The beds are surrounded on both sides and down the center by a 2-foot-wide brick walkway. This whole area is then covered with another larger hoop house through winter. The heat absorbed by the bricks keeps the greenhouse warmer longer. — *Ian, Pennsylvania*

16. I weed by hand or with a hoe and minimize machine tilling. I find my plants grow better because the network of goodness that grows under the soil's surface is allowed to flourish. — *Carol, Massachusetts*

17. I use two windmills. One of the windmills turns a generator that powers batteries for electric power, and the other runs the pump for the well by the garden. — *James, Maryland*

Zero-Waste Gardening

18. We [save urine and dilute it to use as fertilizer](#). Sounds gross, I know, but I have never seen plants grow so well! — *Amanda, Kansas*

19. Whenever I'm chopping vegetables for a meal, I save the excess bits I've cut off of veggies that are well-suited for making soup stock: onion skins, stems of leafy greens, carrot ends, etc. I store all of these in a plastic bag in my freezer, and when I've gotten a good stash saved up, I make a batch of fresh veggie stock, relegating the veggie bits to my compost pile after draining the stock. — *Jennifer, Kansas*

20. When starting a new garden, I first spread out household paper waste (old bills, homework, cereal boxes) and soak it in water. Then, whenever I weed or rake leaves, this refuse goes on the paper. A season's worth of debris lands in the area, and it gets topped off with compost in fall. The bed is ready for planting the following spring. — *Amanda, New York*

21. We don't waste anything. If we can't eat it, the chickens can. When we clean out the coop, the manure goes straight to the compost pile. We don't burn any brush or clippings; it's all shredded and used as mulch or composted. — *Kat, California*

22. Everything in the garden, including veggies the bugs got to before me, goes to the compost pile. At season's end, I uproot my expired plants for compost before seeding cover crops, which get worked into the next season's beds. Grass clippings and raked leaves get put around and over plants that are being overwintered to keep them from freezing. I collect manure for fertilizer from local farms, and I collect discarded cardboard and paper for my worm bins. — *S., California*

23. All supplies like ties and plant markers are recycled or repurposed (rags are torn into strips, popsicle sticks or leftover lumber are plant markers). I make every attempt to minimize all that comes in or goes out of the garden. To be truly sustainable, the entire homestead must work on the closed-loop principle. — *Carol, Massachusetts*

24. My best investment: a small electric garden chipper-shredder. I put prunings and garden waste through the chipper and then on the compost pile. This method reduces the volume of waste and speeds composting. — *Elizabeth, British Columbia*

Integrating Livestock in Your Gardening

25. I integrate my farm animals by using their manure and bedding for mulching. I feed weeds and extra food that is not able to be used by humans to the animals. There is no waste at my home — something always eats it, and then that something is either eaten or contributes to the food cycle. I also use some of my chickens to eat my squash and potato bugs. They are delighted at the treats! — *Laurie, Vermont*

26. I've [trained my goats to pull a cart](#) and supplies. I make completely organic fertilizer and buy the ingredients in bulk, which cuts down on transit. — *Lauren, Washington*

27. We have 240 square feet of composting area to which we add chicken poop. The chicken area is expanded into the garden at the end of the season for cleanup. — *Angela, Indiana*

28. Forget the old saying about goats eating the stickers — use pigs! They eat the vines from the ground up, eat the roots, and then till, leaving you with nice ground. — *Lisa, Washington*

29. I plant some crops for the chickens (Swiss chard is a good one), and in return I get eggs plus manure for compost. I've also hauled loads of autumn leaves into the chicken yard to be turned over, scratched into bits and fertilized through winter, and to then be worked into beautiful compost in spring. — *Lori, Oregon*

30. Cows, goats and sheep eliminate the need for a mower, and guinea hens eat up the insects in my garden. — *Kamia, Missouri*

31. I use ducks for pest control and horses for lawn mowing. — *Cindi, Pennsylvania*

32. Try putting your compost pile in your chicken run — let the chickens do the breaking down and turning. — *Joy, Iowa*

33. My compost pile is enriched by rabbit droppings. I also use compost as a worm bed for chicken feed and for fish bait for my grandkids. — *Doc, Ohio*

(For more on the many ways animals can help in your garden and other areas of your property, see [Homestead Helpers: Sheep, Cattle, Pigs and Poultry](#). — MOTHER)

Sustainable Gardening Tools, Supplies and Amendments

34. Most of my tools are homemade, as I have a forge and blacksmith shop. If I can't make a tool, then I buy at flea markets or garage sales. — *Allan, Iowa*

35. My favorite tool is an [old-fashioned hand sickle](#). It's handy for quick trimming jobs. Who wants to fight a noisy, balky weed-eater engine? — *Margi, Oregon*

36. I have no gas-powered tools. I use hand tools that have been passed down to me, or I repair discarded tools. I have made a broadfork, as they are rare in my area. My favorite tools are my own two hands. — *Adam, Washington*

37. I got a truckload of elephant compost from the local zoo. It cost me \$43. I use that and soil from the chicken run. — *Amy, South Carolina*

38. We have bought or scrounged biomass and even woody prunings from neighbors. My husband has gone to the local harbor to bring back fish waste from fishermen for the compost. If supplies must be bought, my first choice is compostable or used, then recyclable and recycled. For us, it's a defeat to purchase something new, especially if it isn't recyclable. — *Darien, Washington*

39. We buy local. Any lumber we need is locally harvested and milled down the road. Our path and boundary stones are free quarry waste. — *Ken, Pennsylvania*

40. We collect seaweed, dry it in a wooden box and crush it with a heavy roller. Seaweed has all of the elemental requirements for most plants' needs. We shred coconut husks from our own trees for "cocopeat" for water retention. — *Lance, Cayman Islands*

41. I have three friends with livestock who bring me manure. This year, I talked a local park manager into letting me come mow up maple leaves. — *Lisa, Washington*

42. I've asked tree-trimming companies that are trimming near electrical lines to let me take their chipped material to use for mulch. I've also picked up bagged leaves on the curb. — *Robin, Missouri*

43. I use as many products listed by OMRI (Organic Materials Review Institute) as possible. We use cover crops in winter to revive planting beds, and when we pull up the cover crops in spring, the material goes to the compost pile. — *Fran, California*

44. Compost is my No. 1 amendment. Plus, I've started to invest in professional soil testing so that we aren't adding things that the soil doesn't actually need. — *Elizabeth, British Columbia*

Sustainable Seeds

45. I save seeds, choose organic seeds, teach seed saving classes and am involved in local seed swaps. — *Dianna, Arkansas*

46. We use non-hybrid varieties and grow our own seed. We have 28 generations of a giant Indian corn picked from the best plants and best ears. — *Mike, New Jersey*

47. When we buy seeds, we order them from Seed Savers Exchange. Because we don't always need a whole packet, we split an order with some friends. — *Liz, Ohio*

48. I get seeds from the local garden society, friends, neighbors and self-saving. I've been using seeds that originated in my grandfather's garden in the 1970s. — *Ed, New Jersey*

49. This year I bought exclusively open-pollinated heirloom seeds so I don't have to try to keep track of which plants I can save seed from. I try to buy from places that do trial growing in my region for climate and pest-prevention reasons. — *Lauren, Washington*

50. I save as many of my own seeds as I can. Otherwise, I first look for heirloom organic, then heirloom, then organic at local garden shops. My goal is to build my seed supply and not have to purchase seeds. — *Linda, Michigan*

Creative Composting Ideas

51. I compost in homemade tomato cages made out of concrete rebar and wire. — *Leigh, Virginia*

52. My first bin was made by pulling the walls down from a treehouse that was on our property and nailing them around posts to make a massive bin. The trapdoor became the dump-and-mix door. My next setup was a three-bin system made from old wood fencing. — *Diane, Oklahoma*

53. I make “honey pits.” For a spot that needs improving in the long run, dig a pit in the ground, layer materials as they become available (green and brown), including a layer of soil, and chop with a spade occasionally. When full, allow to rest one season and then the spot will be available for planting. I keep the pit covered with an old fence panel, which keeps out critters and allows me to walk over the top. — *Jessica, New Jersey*

54. We use a three-bin system that we’ve had for years. This year, we’ve been making quick extra bins with free wood pallets. I also shred newspapers from a convenience store that were just being thrown away. The employees save them for us now, and we mix the papers with grass clippings and veggie scraps. — *Pam, Wisconsin*

55. I compost in a 55-gallon barrel. I roll it around the yard to mix the materials. — *Chris, Florida*

56. I negotiate with schools, senior citizen homes, grocery stores and hairdressers to pick up their compostables. — *Kamia, Missouri*

57. We do simple slow compost: Food scraps stay on the kitchen counter in a small stainless steel pot (from a thrift store) for a day or two, and then get moved outside to a covered 5-gallon bucket. When the bucket is full, we add it to the current year’s compost pile, put some dirt on top of the kitchen scraps, and cover with dry plant matter (grass or dried leaves, or even chopped up woody material). Once in a while, we add fish scraps or urine. — *Darien, Washington*

58. We have three 3-foot-by-10foot open compost areas, and have arranged with grocery stores to get their produce waste for our compost. — *Angela, Indiana*

59. I create loads of lazy compost. I add alternating layers of green and brown material, plus chicken poop, wood shavings and wood ashes. I grow some plants specifically to be composted, such as comfrey (plus the chickens love it!). After a while, I pull off the top layer to form the base of a new pile and dig into an enormous heap of beautiful, black compost. — *Carol, Massachusetts*

Providing Habitat for Wildlife and Pollinators

60. I plant lots of flowers and provide a supply of clean water in a [birdbath with a rock in it](#) for the pollinators. The rock gives them something coarse to hold on to so they don’t drown. — *Lucie, Pennsylvania*

- 61.** We plant flowers among vegetables and make sure to leave plenty of wild weeds, such as goldenrod, to feed the bees during times when there aren't many other flowers. I mulch my paths and beds with sawdust, cardboard and cut grass, which provides a habitat for frogs, toads, snakes and lizards, all of which help with pests. — *Joe, Michigan*
- 62.** Solitary bees tunnel into wooden fence supports, so I have drilled three-eighths-inch holes in them to get them started. We have lots of bees now. — *Mike, New Jersey*
- 63.** We plant buckwheat as a cover crop specifically because it blooms early in the season when bees are hungry. — *Joyce, Kentucky*
- 64.** We have allowed half of our yard to go native. This not only provides habitat for wildlife, but saves on mowing and yields us plenty of dead material for chipping. — *Kate, Michigan*
- 65.** We select plants that attract wildlife and beneficial insects to our garden. We also provide birdbaths, sandy paths for bugs to sun in, and shady areas as well as sunny areas for various creatures. In our vegetable area, we sometimes let certain veggies bolt for the flowers they produce, which attracts beneficials. — *Fran, California*
- 66.** I have birdhouses scattered all around (purple martin condos, bluebird boxes, wood duck boxes), and bat boxes and carpenter bee blocks. — *Ken, Pennsylvania*
- 67.** It's important to have an area of wild land to provide food, shelter and nesting areas for birds and pollinators. I have several acres now, but I had a tiny patch of wild even when I lived on a postage stamp. — *Carol, Massachusetts*

Gardening and Community

- 68.** I started an employee "community" garden at my workplace last year and the idea is spreading throughout the corporation. — *Sue, New Jersey*
- 69.** I'm well-known for handing vegetables to total strangers. It's how I make friends. I donated 15 rhubarb plants to the local church community garden this year. — *Lisa, Washington*
- 70.** My extra produce goes to a local food pantry, I organize seed and plant swaps, and I give away seedlings. I'm a Master Gardener volunteer, and I make myself available for new gardeners and school gardeners through the program. — *Ali, Maine*
- 71.** I swap produce with my neighbors and co-workers. Sometimes we plan what seeds to grow so each of us has to start fewer varieties. I offer seeds to new gardeners to get them started. I share my seed catalogs to decrease mailings. — *Donna, California*

72. I teach urban homesteading and work with local churches to begin community gardens. I am working with my city council to open public land for more gardens. — *Adam, Washington*

73. I donate my extra produce to a local organization called TAPIN (Touch A Person In Need), where food and household items are given free to anyone who needs them. I also help out at a local community garden whose mission is to teach children about gardening. — *Kira, Rhode Island*

74. I take extra produce to the local assisted-living facility. The residents really appreciate the fresh, organic food. — *Lucie, Pennsylvania*

75. I started a co-op of sorts with my co-workers. We bring our extra produce and eggs into work and swap. I taught a few of the ladies how to can and dry their harvests so they can be more self-sustaining throughout the rest of the year. — *Sarah, Wisconsin*

76. Together with a friend, I have started a monthly gardening class. We meet at my garden or his and show interested folks how to do a range of gardening activities. — *Bill, California*

Overall Advice on Sustainable Gardening

77. Inspiring others — kids and adults alike — is an important part of sustainability. I am welcoming on my farm and invite people to come see what I do. I usually send them home with food so they can taste the quality of homegrown food. — *Laurie, Vermont*

78. Get involved. Read, watch films, join local organizations and clubs, and start with the kids. My grandparents got me interested in growing, preserving, reusing, and saving seeds and natural resources. Sixty years later, I am still doing it. — *Ed, New Jersey*

79. I think about what my grandparents and parents did for their gardens and I try to do the same — nothing complicated, expensive or synthetic. I use what I have, borrow or create what I need, and try to enjoy the process. — *Judy, North Carolina*

80. Sustainability is a process, a journey. Every year brings the opportunity to do better than the year before — avoiding waste and using what you have efficiently, whether it be space, water, seeds, supplies or time. Everyone can create a sustainable garden — people just have to use what they have. For instance, I built a retaining wall using stacked wine bottles and rock. It's beautiful and didn't cost a dime. — *Kat, California*

81. I share produce and cook for potlucks. I think this spreads sustainability (and the gardening bug) as other folks try fresh, organic food. — *Carol, Massachusetts*

82. Sustainability ... you take care of your garden and it takes care of you. There is nothing more rewarding than watching something grow from a tiny seed to full fruit. It fills the body as well as the soul. I get great peace from working in my garden. —
Brianne, Florida

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