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News Release

## **Organic gardening basics for Southern gardeners**

**Question:** I want to start a vegetable garden and grow organically if possible. I have heard it is harder to grow organically in the south – is that true?

**Answer:** It is harder but it is possible. The reason it is harder is due to our climate, especially our heat and humidity. In general the warmer climate favors insect development. Insects that may have one or two generations further north may have four or more generations in the south. Each new generation will be dramatically larger than the preceding generation and therefore more difficult to control. Likewise, many diseases are favored by high humidity and warm temperatures. Diseases are even more difficult to control than insect pests because we have few organic disease control products at our disposal.

That's the bad news but there is some good news for any dedicated gardener willing to follow some good gardening basics. Healthy plants can withstand pests better than weak plants or even over-fertilized plants. Healthy plants start with healthy soil. Healthy soil starts with adding lots of organic matter and adjusting the pH (measurement of the acidity or alkalinity). The best pH level for most vegetables is about 6.5 which is slightly acidic. For information about soil testing visit: [www.aces.edu/soiltest](http://www.aces.edu/soiltest). Free soil test kits are available at the St. Clair County Extension office, located on the lower level of the St. Clair County Courthouse in Pell City, in Suite #103. There is a \$7 charge (per sample) to have your soil tested.

The addition of organic matter is not something you do once and forget it because the same heat and humidity that causes pest problems favors the organisms that decay organic matter. To keep soil healthy you must continually add more organic matter either by growing "green manure" or by adding compost on a regular basis. There are some simple things you can do to help preserve organic matter a little longer. Till the soil as little as possible because the decaying organisms work faster when the soil is disturbed. Use mulch to control weeds because mulch helps you avoid tillage for weed control and it keeps the soil moist and cool. Don't apply mulch too early in the spring however because it may keep the soil from warming enough for rapid growth of small roots.

The best organic matter is what you have available that may be going to waste in your community. The leaves from the trees around your home and in your neighborhood are probably the least expensive material available. Start your own compost pile to convert

your yard waste to black gold. Check with your municipality's waste management department and ask if they compost yard waste. Growing your own "green manure" in unused garden space is not only a good way to increase organic matter it is a smart way to conserve the nutrients already in the soil by recycling them. "Green manure" is a term used to describe cover crops that are grown for their green organic matter and are not grown as a food crop. Buckwheat and millet are great in the summer while ryegrass and clover are good winter cover crops.

For more information on this topic or other horticulture related questions, please contact Regional Extension Agent Tony Glover at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email [gloveta@aces.edu](mailto:gloveta@aces.edu).