



Top 10 Ways to Improve Your Garden¹

A well informed gardener can be happy with their accomplishments in the garden with a few simple guidelines. Working with and understanding the natural growth of plants will help immensely to get the results you want without all of the extra work.

1. **Practice & Learn**— The more you grow, the more you will find out what works best for you. Attend classes or garden clubs to get more details and see how other people are improving their gardens.
2. **Know Your Zone**— Zone One is the north pole. Think of a pole sticking out of the ground up there. In the Mid-Ohio Valley, we are a Zone Five (plants that survive down to -15°F). There are a few lucky folks who can get away with Zone Six plants, but only in special situations along the river and in-town. For everyone else, Zone Six plants will only frustrate when they don't bloom or even die!
3. **Soil Test**— Have you ever used lime on your garden? Is it worth \$11 every couple of years to save \$30 on fertilizer? Only a soil test can steer you in the correct direction. The pH of the soil (chemical charge) can affect how and if you plants can take up certain nutrients. Soil testing is simple and can take all of the guess work out of liming and fertilization.
4. **Air & Sunlight**— You can decrease disease pressure immensely if you can change the environment which supports diseases. The best environment for many diseases consists of cool temperatures, darkness and the presence of moisture. So, if one can control the environment (i.e. – eliminate moisture through proper airflow and sunlight exposure) disease can be controlled or eliminated!
5. **Clean Up & Prune**— Many of us do not do a good job cleaning up plant debris in the fall. This harbors disease all winter long and into the next year. Pruning is a chore, but saves lots of time later. Pruning basics: prune for air flow and sunlight penetration. Make clean cuts.
6. **Mulch With Care**— Mulching too thick can kill plants. Mulching too thin can leave you with lots of weeds. Mulching takes some work and practice to find what best fits you. Everything from newspapers to grass clippings and the favorite hardwood mulch will work.
7. **Water Properly**— Even though the gardener in the commercial looks happy and the plants look happy when they get water sprayed all over the tops of them – neither will be happy for too long. Watering should happen at the root zone. Use of soaker hoses or slow draining buckets of water.
8. **Mow High**— Yes, lawns are part of the garden. They don't need to be perfect, but can look better with a few simple steps. Mower blades should be sharpened as to not make 'wounds' to grass blades when mowing. Most important: mow at least three inches high. Taller grasses crowd out broadleaf weeds naturally and grasses are healthier through increased photosynthesis.
9. **Compost**— Soils vary greatly, especially around your home where fill may have been added. Soils range from hard clay to coarse sand. Compost will help add organic matter to clay for better root penetration. Compost will help sandy soil hold more water and nutrients. Either way, plants will be healthier for the addition. A compost pile can be simple. Start with all yard/garden waste and everything from the kitchen (except oils and meat scraps).
10. **Pests!**— Knowing the bad ones from the good ones will get you moving in the right direction. Gardeners are best off adopting integrated pest management where they scout, identify, and then control harmful insects. Many plants can take on quite a few bad insects before harm is done. Many times, picking off the bad insects can work. Knowing the insect and its life cycle will also help eliminate the potential destruction.

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