

dig in!

How to avoid common problems and grow your best garden yet *by Laura Kenyon*

Home gardens are great—they can be a source of food, a place of beauty, and an evolving project the whole family can get in on together. But how do you keep problems at bay? Here are some tips for making the most of your outdoor oasis.

PROBLEM: You want to keep pests out of your garden, but are looking to steer clear of chemicals.

In a perfect world, aphids and spider mites would stay far away from your garden. But until then, gardeners looking to grow healthy plants without the worrisome chemicals (and without harming any animals!) have a few choices.

The most important option is one that new gardeners often overlook: soil. “Always remember that you’re growing the roots as much as you’re growing the leaves and flowers,” says Fern Marshall Bradley, author of *Rodale’s Vegetable Garden Problem Solver*. “Healthy plants, just like healthy people, are much more able to resist problems that may come their way.” Adding compost is a good start, but checking your soil’s pH is even better. Most plants like slightly acidic to neutral soil (pH 6-7), which can be achieved by adding lime if the pH is too low, or elemental sulfur if it’s too high. DIY kits are available, and many local garden centers will test soil samples if you bring them in.

When it’s time to dig in, bolster your garden’s defenses by including plants that attract helpful insects, like hoverflies, lacewings, and lady beetles. “Excellent plants that attract beneficials in a wide range of climates include two easy perennial herbs, oregano and catnip, and anise hyssop, often grown as an annual,” says Barbara Pleasant, author of *Starter Vegetable Gardens: 24 No-Fail Plans for Small Organic Gardens*.

Once plants are growing, watch closely to catch problems early. While it’s impossible to banish pests completely, the experts advise fencing in your garden to deter four-legged critters, and covering plants with row cover (lightweight fabric that floats atop the leaves) to block out the fliers and crawlers. Organic sprays and soaps are another option, but keep in mind that these might harm the good insects, too.

PROBLEM: You want to use the garden as a learning tool for the whole family.

With so many things competing for kids’ attention these days, it might seem like they’ll never be interested in vegetables and flowers. But don’t underestimate the power of Mother Nature. “Playing in the dirt with toy trucks and shovels is incredibly



free, creative play that connects kids with nature,” says Pleasant.

To get them excited about your family garden from the start, seek out their input. “Take them to the garden center with you to pick out the plants,” says Sarah Pounders, education specialist with the National Gardening Association. Start small (raised beds and container gardens are the easiest) and lean toward hardy plants that don’t attract too many insects.

Pounders also suggests giving kids an area where they can monitor the plants, play in the dirt, or even build things, like sunflower houses or bean teepees. To create a sunflower house, plant sunflower seeds in a square, leaving a small opening on one side. Once the flowers grow, they’ll become the walls and the opening will act as the “door.” For the bean teepee, use stakes or bamboo to make a teepee-like structure that the plants can grow up onto. “Kids love little enclosed spaces where they can feel like it’s their own little area, but you can still watch them and know they’re safe,” says Pounders.

PROBLEM: You love your garden—but it’s making it hard to conserve water.

Rain barrels, which catch water as it falls, are quickly becoming the go-to method for nourishing plants without waste. But Bradley warns gardeners to be mindful of what that water is touching (like a roof that could have bird droppings) before using it on anything you eventually plan to eat.

Other methods are drip irrigation, grouping plants by thirst, and soaker hoses. Made from recycled rubber tires, soaker hoses weep water along the garden at a very low pressure. “When covered with a mulch of grass clippings or wood chips, not a drop is wasted and plants get the water they need,” says Pleasant. The mulch does triple duty by hiding the hoses, keeping the soil extra moist, and giving kids an art project. Make it yourself with shredded leaves, bark, grass clippings, or hay, or buy it (a non-cocoa variety for pet owners) in stores. And if your little one loves to water, give him a watering can with very small holes, so he has fun—and less water is wasted, suggests Pounders. ●