ORGANIC IN A NUTSHELL\*

(\*from Your Organic Garden with Jeff Cox)

If you’re new to organic gardening, here are some basic suggestions to help you get started:

**Read about gardening and growing plants, especially using the organic method.** Learning about gardening is an ongoing process that gardeners enjoy throughout their lives.

**Use a plan and keep records.** Find out about the plants you want to grow and which types will grow best in your area. Draw a sketch of your garden and decide what will go where, then revise it as you work. Begin a garden journal for keeping records through the season. Stock up on supplies and tools you may need during the gardening year.

**Learn more about your soil.** You may want to have it tested by the Cooperative Extension Service or by a private laboratory. Use the results as a guide to bring your soil into balance with a long-term approach – biological changes aren’t instant and may take several years! Add lime, compost, or organic fertilizers as needed. Maintain soil balance by growing green manure crops and adding organic matter each season.

**Start a compost pile.** Recycling garden wastes and increasing soil organic matter are two fundamentals of organic gardening. Composting helps you do both. There are many simple designs for compost enclosures, or you can just make a compost heap in a corner of your yard.

**Keep the garden clean.** Garden sanitation protects plants against pests and diseases. Clearing crop waste out of the vegetable garden and pruning diseased branches from trees and shrubs not only helps the appearance of your garden but also makes for a healthy garden. Having a clean garden also means carefully inspecting any newly bought plants to ensure that they aren’t carriers of diseases or insects. Make garden cleanup part of your usual gardening routine, rather than a once-in-the-fall extravaganza.

**Learn to manage pest problems.**  The idea behind most organic techniques is to sidestep the insect problem one way or another or to let natural controls kill off the pests. Keep plants healthy with timely feeding and watering. Encourage beneficial insects. Use row covers to exclude pests; build a fence to exclude animals. Try biological control techniques. As a last resort, use botanical insecticides.

**Practice disease prevention.** Prevention and protection are the keys to organic disease control. If you keep plants healthy, they will be robust and vigorous enough to resist most diseases. Whenever possible, use disease-resistant or disease-tolerant plants. Clean up the garden regularly and put diseased plant materials in the trash or a hot compost pile. It’s also important to rotate crops, not handle plants when they’re wet, and be gentle when you pick and cultivate so you don’t create wounds where disease organisms can gain entry. Reserve sprays and dusts for fighting disease organisms that could wipe out yields or kill your plants.

**Banish weeds.** The organic gardener’s first line of attack against weeds is to prevent them from getting a foothold in the garden. For existing weed problems, organic gardeners begin by identifying the weed, and then use specific techniques that will be most effective for eradicating that plant. So, set aside some time for good old-fashioned weeding, and learn about other techniques for controlling weeds that don’t require a hoe and a strong back.