The perfect garden—free of all pests, weeds and weather surprises—does not exist. Nor does the perfect place to garden, because every climate is friendly to some crops and hostile to others. Thankfully, tackling gardening challenges, while frustrating at times, is part of what makes growing your own food such a lively adventure.

Smart garden troubleshooting is often crucial to successful food production, and working out the best solutions may require years of trial-and-error experimentation. To help you get a jump-start, we asked more than a dozen longtime organic gardeners to share their expertise on tactics for solving common organic vegetable gardening problems. Following is a roundup of their collective wisdom.

Critter and Pest Patrol
Dealing with insect pests, rabbits, deer, voles and other critters is perhaps one of the most frustrating and ubiquitous gardening challenges. Organic vegetable gardening can make this issue trickier in that you’ve wisely opted not to use harsh chemicals to keep such troubles at bay. In the case of critters, good fences can make for good harvests (and offer the kindest solution), and diligent monitoring for pests will prove well worth your time.
Address garden challenges as they come, such as putting down weed-barrier cloth to combat severe weed problems.

Irritating insects. An hour north of St. Louis, in New Douglas, Ill., Carol Lentz aims to check her plants for insect pests at least every other day. “Check the whole plant for signs of trouble, especially the leaf undersides,” she says. Squish any eggs you see, and handpick adult potato beetles, squash bugs and Mexican bean beetles and put them in a pail of soapy water to reduce their damage to plants and prevent a second (or third) generation.

Those darn rabbits. In Fargo, N.D., Joe Calvert says rabbits are second only to his short growing season on his list of gardening challenges. “Even in an urban environment, if you don’t have a fence around the garden, you may as well not even plant because the tender young plants are too tempting to rabbits,” he says. To keep rabbits out, add inexpensive poultry wire around at-risk beds or around the bottom of a perimeter fence. Folding 6 to 12 inches of the wire out from the bottom will also fend off critters that may try to dig under the fence.

In the piney woods north of Covington, La., Carrie Lee Schwartz says containers are sometimes safer than an open garden. “I hang delicate crops, such as lettuce and strawberries, in planters on my porch to keep them close to the kitchen and away from rabbits,” she says.

Pesky groundhogs. When Tim and Mary Ann Kirby began gardening near Pittsburgh, Pa., they had a diligent guard dog that chased away wandering animals. “He has since died, and the critters have been a headache,” Mary Ann laments. “We have a good fence, but it’s not enough to keep out groundhogs and raccoons.” She says groundhogs were the more problematic of the duo, first devouring broccoli and then helping themselves to cantaloupe. In addition to having a guard dog around, a couple of strands of electric fencing low to the ground can help deter groundhogs. On many homesteads with big gardens, growers set up permanent post-and-wire fencing or rigid livestock panels, and then add poultry netting and electric fencing for further protection.

Grubbin’ grasshoppers. Grasshoppers can devastate organic gardens, particularly in areas with hot, dry weather. These long-legged leapers are especially damaging to lettuce, beans, corn, carrots, onions and cabbage-family crops grown for fall harvest. Among the best organic controls for grasshoppers are excluding them via row covers or screen barriers (get free used screen material from hardware stores that repair damaged screens), and employing poultry to patrol garden areas and snatch up the grasshoppers as snacks.

Hundreds of grasshopper species live in North America, and you’ll be dealing with a particular type. Melody Gould has been gardening in the Tampa Bay area for more than 10 years, where eastern lubber grasshoppers are often a food-grower’s foe. For control, gather and drown the hoppers in a pail of soapy water when they’re still showing the black-and-yellow coloring of youth. Gould explains that if you don’t catch them when they’re little, the lubbers will grow into huge, 3- to 4-inch grasshoppers that can clear all of the vegetation off a full-sized tomato plant overnight.

Oh, deer. The drought that has caused northeast Texas and other areas to shrivel has led to desperate hunger among wild things. “The shortage of greenery for wildlife has caused our worst gardening problems ever,” says Carole Ramke, who has been gardening organically in Kilgore, Texas, for more than 20 years. She had to build chicken-wire cages around her sweet potatoes — inside the garden fence — to protect them from deer. The deer started eating things they’d never eaten before, such as okra, watermelon vines, green persimmons and whole limbs of fig trees. “Our smaller melons even had tooth marks from raccoons, coyotes and deer. We were finally able to put a stop to the
damage by installing an economical double electric fence around the garden and orchard," Ramke says.

In addition to fencing, consider trying a deer repellent. While no repellent, commercial or homemade, can provide 100 percent protection, some do work well. Researchers in Connecticut found that egg-based repellents and the commercial brands Bobbex and Hinder are your best bets. (Find out “Which Deer Repellents Work Best” at http://goo.gl/z2mCNY.)

Weather Woes and Climate Complications

Charting about weather isn’t just small talk when it comes to organic vegetable gardening. Weather can make or break a growing season or the success of certain crops, and a savvy gardener should eye the forecast and pay attention to overall climate trends. (Our When to Plant app, available at www.MotherEarthNews.com/When-To-Plant-App, includes links to long-term weather forecasts.) In Bath, Ohio, Pat Kennedy has spent decades learning and relearning that one can’t control the weather. “We recently had one of the wettest years in Ohio history. But at least my garden wasn’t flooded, I didn’t feel an earthquake, and no tornadoes or hurricanes came through,” Kennedy says. “Some things grew, some didn’t. The melons had so little flavor that they ended up in the compost pile, but both the hot and sweet peppers made the best crop ever, and I actually had artichokes! Start each season prepared, flexible and hopeful, and remember that there is always next year.”

Soggy spring soil. Carol Lentz in southern Illinois says she’s had to delay spring planting of cool-weather vegetables because of waterlogged soil in April, the prime planting month in her region for beets, carrots, lettuce, peas, potatoes and cabbage-family crops. “We construct raised rows in fall, when the soil is warm and workable,” she says. After mixing 2 to 4 inches of compost into the soil, Lentz then rakes it into mounds about 12 inches high and 3 feet wide. “Placing leaves between the raised beds provides a walkway and is a good way to compost the leaves during winter,” she says. Raising your beds or rows in this way will help with soil drainage, and you can also use a broadfork to loosen wet soil in early spring so it will dry and warm up faster.

Relentless rain. “For the past several springs we’ve had record rainfall in spring—like we don’t get enough already! Because of this problem, some seeds will simply rot in the ground, and replanting is the only solution,” says Catherine Miller-Smith, who lives in rainy Vancouver, British Columbia. If you’re facing persistent rains, she suggests planting three sowings to ensure good germination of sweet corn and any other crops proving troublesome to get growing.

Short springs. After growing veggies near Baltimore for more than 20 years, Barbara White says gardeners in her area should look for fast-maturing varieties of broccoli, lettuce, peas and other cool-season crops because spring turns to summer so quickly in her region. With lettuce and spinach, she suggests using a portable “salad table”—a simple table-type frame with a recessed top for holding soil (see photo on Page 31)—that can be moved to shade when the weather gets too warm. “I made my first salad table in 2005 after our local Master Gardener coordinator taught
a workshop," White says. "They cost $10 to $15 to make, and even someone with little in the way of carpentry skills can do it. I had the local hardware store cut the wood and then went home with all the supplies and made my first salad table in about an hour."

Bill Nunes of Gustine, Calif., says gardeners in the Central Valley need to take special care with peas because of short springs, but good returns will usually result from making more than one sowing and using more than one variety. This approach works with other crops, too. "Always hedge your bets, even with your favorite and most reliable varieties of peas, melons, tomatoes and garlic," Nunes says.

Summer drought. Weather experts have warned gardeners in many regions of the country — especially Texas and Midwestern states — to expect more droughts in future years. Gardeners should consult their local extension services to get drought-tolerant crop and variety recommendations. (Watch for a chart of drought-resistant varieties in our June/July 2014 issue.—Mother.) Water with drip hose to make sure water reaches plants' roots. Harvesting runoff water from buildings is another smart maneuver to consider. "I placed a row of rain barrels made from garbage cans behind a storage building," says Carole Ramke of eastern Texas. "On my sewing machine, I made a cover for each can from a circle of fiberglass screen, with a casing and drawstring on the edge. The covers keep out leaves and even prevent mosquitoes."

Near Northampton, Mass., Stephen Bond begins collecting rainwater from the roof of his garden shed in spring, specifically for application in the summer dry season when his community is under watering restrictions. "For more efficient watering, I also bury soaker hoses under my tomatoes and peppers so I can hook up my hose when the plants need water," Bond says. "That way, I don't lose nearly as much water to evaporation."

Fleeting summers. In wind-swept Cortez, Colo., at 6,100 feet elevation, Fran Marciano says that starting seeds indoors is a priority as summer arrives late and doesn't last long. "We can have snow or killing frost well into June, followed by many hot days in July and August," Marciano says. "An early start indoors is essential to making the most of a short, quirky growing season."

Soil and Weeds
Healthy soil rich with nutrients and organic matter from compost will go a long way toward thwarting all kinds of gardening challenges. Excellent soil leads to healthy, vigorous plants, and strong plants aren't as likely to be attacked by pests and can often beat competition from weeds. (Plus, an oft-overlooked aspect of nutrient-rich soil is that it equates to more nutritious fruits and vegetables.) No matter your soil type, weeds are inevitable, but we dig Connecticut grower Michael Brunetti’s positive spin on the challenge: "You'll always have some weeds, but if you weed a little bit each day, you can stay on top of them. Just think of weeding as an enjoyable therapy that takes you away from the everyday busyness of life."

Disappearing soil nutrients. Rainfall in excess of 50 inches per year will wash nutrients from the soil, but frequent infusions of organic matter will greatly improve soil's ability to hang on to them. "A month or more before planting, dig up your garden and mix in some organic fertilizer and at least 2 inches of compost," advises Ronald Weathersby, who keeps a 2,000-square-foot garden in saturated Leesville, La. If you live in a dry area, this is still sound advice because compost holds in soil moisture, too.
Low organic matter. Every plot has a different jumping-off point when it comes to soil quality. "Our soil is naturally alkaline and rich in minerals but low in organic matter, so it needs to be enriched with as much organic matter as possible," says Teresa Ebie, who gardens just north of Taos, N.M., at 7,000 feet elevation. "Root crops and greens do exceptionally well here, so they are a good place to start if you're a new gardener," Ebie says. "After you gain experience and enrich the soil, you'll be amazed at what you can grow. Last fall, we packed our root cellar with storage crops—more than 100 pounds of carrots, 75 pounds of potatoes, and smaller amounts of beets, turnips, onions, garlic and winter squash.”

Woeful weeds. Michael Brunette, a 30-year organic gardening veteran who lives in New Hartford, Conn., recommends using permanent beds as a primary strategy against weeds. "I use permanent raised beds and never set foot in them," he says. "I never let weeds in the paths go to seed, and I use various organic mulches to suppress weeds after the soil warms up.”

Another good strategy, this one courtesy of Bill Nunes in central California: If you can afford the time, sow cover crops before any food crops to build soil tilth and organic matter, and to control weeds. "Buckwheat is great here in summer, and winter rye, peas and fava beans work well in our mild winters to suppress winter annuals and grasses," Nunes says. "Building the soil food web with cover crops will give you more disease-resistant vegetables.”

Red clay. Former Georgia extension horticulturist Daryl Pulis has long advocated applying coarse organic matter, such as composted bark or wood chips, to boost the quality of red clay soil, which can prove impossible to dig to more than 10 inches deep. Lifelong organic gardener Joyce Reid of Carrollton, Ga., also advises any gardener to address the soil issue first, but she's opted to modify her bed design as part of that plan: "My solution has been raised beds. Instead of trying to dig down, I went up. Still, the soil has to be reconditioned every year or it naturally becomes compacted.” (For more advice on how to improve clay soil, turn to Page 79.)

Timing and Season Extension

When it comes to starting seeds, planting and even harvesting, timing varies not only among general regions but also within microclimates. As you come to understand your exact growing conditions better each year, you can hone in on the best schedule and even discover how to eat at least some food from your garden all year.

Targeted timing. In my southwest Virginia garden, I've found that the records I keep from year to year are among my most valuable gardening tools. Even with simple crops such as carrots, getting planting dates right is what makes the difference between a good crop yield and an outstanding one.

Filling up four seasons. Year-round growing isn't difficult in many areas provided gardeners plan ahead to make the best, full use of the calendar. Gulf Coast gardener Ronald Weathersby takes full advantage of his area's generous growing season. "You can start harvesting cool-season vegetables in April and May, harvest summer crops next, and then enjoy a third harvest season in fall and winter," he says.

Season extension. Since they began homesteading in 1999 in Virgil, N.Y., Chris and Bob Applegate have steadily installed features that add months to their growing season, including two small greenhouses. "Our original, unheated greenhouse produces more than 10 months' worth of produce, with arugula, spinach and parsley making it through even the worst winters,” Chris says, adding that the new greenhouse will provide food for their flocks, too. "I have added kale,
Chinese cabbage and collards to feed the chickens throughout winter. We do all this with a limited income and a lot of sweat equity."

**Crop protection.** Just north of Colorado Springs, Colo., Kay Fisher and her husband use plastic-covered hoop houses to extend their growing season. A bonus of their season-extension setup is that they can then cover the hoops with netting in summer to protect plants from pests.

“We put rebar inside the edges of our raised beds, sticking up about a foot. Then we cut black flexible hose used for sprinkler systems to the appropriate lengths and slip the ends over the rebar to form hoops,” Fisher explains. “When plastic or row covers are no longer needed, we attach small bird netting to the hoops with zip ties along the bottom, leaving the ties a little loose so the netting can be moved up and down to access the beds for weeding and picking. The netting keeps out deer and most other pests, and it reduces damage from hail.”

**Crop Considerations**

You likely won’t be able to grow *all* crops where you live. Some crops just won’t do well in certain regions, at least not without a lot of extra care and attention. “My advice to new gardeners is to amend your soil well, no matter what you’re growing, and sow crops that thrive in your climate,” says Dave Sexton, who has been gardening in Oregon’s Willamette Valley for decades.

**Growing tomatoes.** In her rainy British Columbia climate, Catherine Miller-Smith says the best solution for overcoming the soggy soil and cool rains that delay tomato planting and promote late blight is to grow tomatoes in plastic-covered hoop houses. “My tomatoes have a roof over their heads. I install a head-high hoop house in spring, keeping the sides down. Then, I slowly lift the sides as the weather warms, until only the top of the hoop house is still intact,” she says. After cooler weather returns in fall, she begins rolling the plastic back down until it touches the ground again.

**Cold-weather crops.** Some crops are just plain miserable in heat. “We have a hard time growing cold-weather vegetables here in Tampa Bay,” says Florida gardener Melody Gould. “We could be sweating in shorts and tank tops on a December day that reaches 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and then have lows drop to near freezing for a few days, followed by days when the temperature goes right back up to 90.” She encourages sticking with heat-tolerant crops, such as peppers, tomatoes, eggplant and others with tropical ancestry, if you live in hot, humid climates.

**Cool, cloudy climates.** Oregonians are no strangers to gray days, but many crops thrive there. “Cool-season greens and cole crops are easy and do well most of the year here. Many perennials, such as raspberries and artichokes, do well because of our mild winters, and potatoes and blueberries love the acidic soil,” says Dave Sexton. Garlic and leeks are easy in the Northwest, too, but Sexton explains that tomatoes really thrive only if you plant stout seedlings that were started very early indoors, insulate the soil with mulch, and protect the plants with cloches during the beginning of the season.

**You Can Do It!**

Growing your own food using organic methods is one of the single best things you can do for the health of you, your family and our environment. Plus, there’s nothing like toting a heaping garden harvest into your kitchen to give you that one-of-a-kind satisfaction that comes from self-reliance. So, no matter what gardening challenges crop up for you, don’t be tempted to throw up your arms in defeat. The most advanced gardeners—and even farmers who have been at the task for decades—will tell you they never stop learning.

On your path to success, note what doesn’t work for you and try new methods, crops and varieties every year. Talk to other gardeners, because if you’re experiencing a challenge, you’re likely not alone. (An easy way to connect with other gardeners in your vicinity is via our new state and province Facebook pages. Find your area’s page at www.MotherEarthNews.com/Facebook.) Today, you may be the one asking most of the questions, but 10 or 20 years down the road, you may be the sage mentor talking over the fence with a newbie gardener, sharing what you’ve learned along the way. In this sense, “challenges” aren’t just troublesome annoyances—they’re opportunities to meet your neighbors and add to your bank of gardening know-how.