

The Garden Success Checklist

10 Science-Based Steps to Grow Healthier Plants,
Better Soil, and More Successful Gardens



Healthy Soil → Healthy Plants → Healthy Food → Healthy People → Healthy Ecosystems

Before You Begin

Whether you are a home gardener, Master Gardener, educator, homesteader, or beginning farmer, most growing challenges can be traced back to a handful of foundational principles. This checklist will help identify strengths, uncover opportunities for improvement, and focus on practices that have the greatest impact.



Healthy Soil



Healthy Plants



Healthy Food



Healthy People



Healthy Ecosystems



Every garden is an ecosystem.

1 Clarify Your Goals

Why It Matters:

A vegetable garden, pollinator habitat, food forest, school garden, and cut flower garden each require different management approaches.

Quick Assessment: What are your primary goals?

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Grow food | ☐ Improve soil health |
| ☐ Improve nutrition | ☐ Reduce maintenance |
| ☐ Create beauty | ☐ Teach others |
| ☐ Support pollinators | ☐ Build community |

Action Step: Based on your goals, identify the area where you need the most information, knowledge, or confidence to achieve success.

2 Understand Your Site

Why It Matters: Site conditions often determine success more than anything else.

Quick Assessment: For your garden, or the site you want to develop, do you know:

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Hours of sunlight? | ☐ Water access, quantity, and quality? |
| ☐ Drainage patterns? | ☐ Wind exposure? |
| ☐ Low and high spots? | ☐ Existing vegetation? |

Action Step: Spend 15 minutes observing your site at different times of day. Research how much precipitation you receive annually and your average first and last frost dates.

3 Evaluate Your Soil

Why It Matters:

Healthy soil supports water infiltration, nutrient cycling, root growth, and biological activity.

Quick Assessment: Can you answer:

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ What is your soil texture? | ☐ Are earthworms or other soil organisms present? |
| ☐ Does water infiltrate easily? | ☐ Have you conducted a soil test? |
| ☐ Is organic matter visible? | |

Action Step: Dig a small hole and examine your soil profile and observe the quality of your soil. Send a soil sample to a lab that performs a soil health analysis (e.g. Regen Ag Lab) to report soil microbial respiration and percent organic matter. Most soils are currently degraded and do not read above 200 ppm for respiration. (Lab websites provide sampling instructions.)

4 Build Soil Organic Matter

Why It Matters

Organic matter is the engine of soil fertility. It feeds microbes, holds water, improves structure, and slowly releases nutrients plants need.

Quick Assessment: Are you using these practices or amendments?

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| ☐ Compost | ☐ Cover crops |
| ☐ Mulch | ☐ Organic amendments |

Action Step: Choose one additional soil-building practice to learn about and consider implementing it.

5 Keep Soil Covered

Why It Matters

Bare soil is vulnerable soil. Mulch and living covers protect against erosion, temperature extremes, and moisture loss while feeding soil biology.

Quick Assessment: Approximately what percentage of your soil is covered?

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| ☐ Less than 2% | ☐ Less than 2% |
| ☐ 25-50% | ☐ 25-50% |

Action Step: Identify one area of bare soil and cover it with 2-3 inches of organic mulch today.

6 Match Plants to Conditions

Why It Matters

The right plant in the right place requires less water, fertilizer, and maintenance.

Quick Assessment: Before planting, do you know:

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Mature size? | ☐ Soil preferences? |
| ☐ Sun requirements? | ☐ Heat and cold tolerance? |
| ☐ Water needs? | |

Action Step: Review one struggling plant and determine whether it is well suited to the site.

7 Water Wisely

Why It Matters

Both overwatering and underwatering are common causes of poor plant performance.

Quick Assessment:

- ☐ Do you check soil moisture before watering?
- ☐ Are plants watered deeply?
- ☐ Is water amount adjusted seasonally?
- ☐ Is mulch used to conserve moisture?

Action Step: Monitor soil moisture before your next watering event.

8 Support Biodiversity

Why It Matters

Diverse systems are often more productive, resilient, and resistant to pests and diseases.

Quick Assessment:

 Do you provide:

- ☐ Flowering plants
- ☐ Diverse plantings
- ☐ Pollinator habitat
- ☐ Native species
- ☐ Habitat for beneficial organisms?

Action Step: Add one plant or feature that supports biodiversity.

9 Observe Before You React

Why It Matters

Many management decisions are made too quickly and address symptoms rather than causes.

Quick Assessment:

 Before taking action, do you ask:

- ☐ What is happening?
- ☐ What evidence do I have?
- ☐ Why is it happening?
- ☐ Is intervention necessary?

Action Step: Choose one challenge and investigate the root cause before treating it.

10 Reflect and Improve

Why It Matters

The most successful gardeners continually observe, learn, and adapt.

Quick Assessment:

 At the end of each season:

- ☐ What worked?
- ☐ What didn't work?

Action Step: Reflect on three lessons learned from previous garden experiences.

Your Garden Success Score

How many boxes did you check?

8–10

**Strong
Foundation**

You have a strong foundation.
Focus on continuous
improvement and refinement.

5–7

**Good
Progress**

You're on the right path.
Strengthening a few key areas
can significantly improve
results.

0–4

**Focus on
Fundamentals**

Focus first on site assessment,
soil health, and plant selection.
These areas often provide the
greatest return on effort.

My Top 3 Priorities This Season

1.

2.

3.

Healthy Soil → Healthy Plants → Healthy Food → Healthy People → Healthy Ecosystems

Remember: every garden is an ecosystem, and your choices make ripples outward.

Start where you are, use what you have, and grow from there.

Continue Your Learning Journey

The Garden Science Foundations course enables you to go deeper into the science behind healthy gardens and resilient ecosystems. We translate proven ecological and horticultural research into practical guidance you can use — from building living soil to designing biodiverse landscapes that thrive with less intervention.

What You'll Learn

- ✓ Soil Health & Biology
- ✓ Ecological Gardening Practices
- ✓ Mitigating Pests with Healthier Plants
- ✓ Composting Systems
- ✓ Pollinator Support
- ✓ Land Stewardship

Join the Agroecology School Community

Learn the science. Grow with confidence. Steward the land.

www.theagroecologyschool.com



Rooted in science, guided by nature.