


IN THE GARDEN

Is ‘No Dig’ Gardening Really Possible?

Charles Dowding, a longtime proponent, insists that it’s not only easier than what you’re doing now, but it actually works. Here’s how.

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Charles Dowding’s no-dig system does not involve tilling or other soil preparation, or the use of fertilizers. Instead, he supports the soil by adding an inch-deep layer of compost to every bed in the fall. Jonathan Buckley

By Margaret Roach

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While many of us will soon be out there making like a human rototiller — turning the vegetable beds in the name of what we were taught “soil preparation” required — [Charles Dowding](#) takes a different tack.

With a bow rake or an oscillating hoe in hand, he kicks off the new season with a quick pass over each bed, “tickling the soil surface,” he said, rather than upending it, “to disturb any weeds seeds that might be germinating.”

No tilling, thanks — or “no dig,” as he calls this method he has popularized.

It isn’t the only subject on which Mr. Dowding, a longtime market gardener in Somerset, in South West England, and a no-dig practitioner for 40 years, departs from conventional wisdom.

He doesn’t sow cover crops. (His beds are too busy with repeat plantings, one after another.) And he doesn’t rotate crops in the traditional manner, which calls for not growing the same thing in the same spot in consecutive years. (Last year marked year eight of successfully growing potatoes in one bed, and cabbages and fava beans in others.)

With certain vegetables, including beets, turnips and onions, he defies the usual advice about spacing. Instead, he “multisows” small groupings of seeds together in cells in his greenhouse and later transplants the little clusters into the garden.

And his at-the-ready hand tool? No, not pruning shears — a pocketknife.



Mr. Dowding, the no-dig guru, harvests 25,000 British pounds’ worth of organic produce annually from the growing beds at his property, Homeacres, in Somerset, England — all without tilling. Jonathan Buckley

Have a Gardening Question? Ask Our Expert.

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But from a third of an acre of active growing beds on his property, known as Homeacres, he harvests 25,000 British pounds’ worth of organic edibles annually, selling to a local restaurant and shops. Another yield: More than a dozen books, online and in-person courses, a [YouTube channel](#) with over 600,000 subscribers and an [Instagram account](#) with nearly 400,000 followers.

People really dig no dig. (Sorry, that sentence was irresistible.)

Editors’ Picks



Mr. Dowding finds an arrogance in humankind's insistence that we must intervene to improve soil. In plant communities, from forests to meadows, he points out, leaves and other plant parts wither, drop and decay to support the soil without any churning.

Tilling doesn't build soil structure, he contends; it destroys it. He advises that we follow nature's example, "just leaving the soil alone as much as possible and feeding the surface with compost, so that the soil life does the work for us."

And maybe the best part: It's an incredible labor saver. (Although Mr. Dowding is no slacker.)

In his recent book "No Dig: Nurture Your Soil to Grow Better Vegetables with Low Effort," he puts it this way: "Simple is best, and taking easier approaches that work well is clever rather than lazy."

Clever gardeners — and those ready for fewer weeds, another major benefit of his approach — may find a match in no dig.



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Where the soil is poor or weed pressure is high, a new no-dig bed is prepared by spreading six inches of compost on cardboard. During the first season, frame the bed with lumber held in place by stones. "You could make a bed like that in the morning and put your plants in that afternoon," Mr. Dowding said.

Jonathan Buckley

Bed Preparation, No-Dig Style

There is nothing tricky about this system, which hinges on a regular late-fall practice of [mulching](#) with well-aged [compost](#). A deeper layer is applied in the beginning, followed by about an inch-deep application every year thereafter (and that “tickling,” as spring approaches).

Transforming an existing bed or another largely weed-free area to no dig typically requires nothing more than raking the surface level and spreading a two-inch layer of compost.

To turn a piece of lawn into a bed, first mow it and then spread overlapping sheets of brown cardboard. Moisten the cardboard and top the surface with about three inches of compost.

Where the soil is poor or the weed pressure higher, go a little deeper, spreading six inches of compost on top of the cardboard.

To support that depth of material the first season — and to keep the compost depth intact, even at the edges where weeds will try to creep in — Mr. Dowding recommends framing the bed temporarily with lengths of lumber held in place by heavy stones.

“You could make a bed like that in the morning and put your plants in that afternoon,” he said. “You haven’t got to wait for the weeds underneath to die because your new plants, or seeds, start growing in the surface compost.”

By the time they’re rooting deeper, the cardboard will be decomposing, along with the lawn or weeds underneath. “And the soil will be opening up for receiving the roots of your new plants,” he said.

The usual objection he hears is that people don’t have enough compost for that initial application. Buying a load of well-aged compost is your best investment, he suggested, adding this reminder: The no-dig gardener will be buying no other amendments — and that means no more fertilizers.





Mr. Dowding multisows various crops, including onions, indoors in cells. Then he transplants the clusters without separating the seedlings. Jonathan Buckley

‘Exhausting the Weeds’ and Multisowing

When Mr. Dowding sees a weed popping up, he doesn’t get in there with a big implement to try to unearth what he calls “the parent root.” He focuses on “exhausting the weeds” by taking off the photosynthetic part, over and again, “using a trowel, but doing it in a gentle way, going down pretty vertically near to the new shoot and levering out as much stem as comes out.”

Yes, it may take six months to deter an insistent dandelion, but the soil is not damaged or opened up substantially, which would give weeds an easier passageway upward.

Ever had large seeds like peas stolen by mice or chipmunks from direct-sown rows outside? To defy them, and to get a head start on the season, Mr. Dowding sows indoors in cells about an inch across, several seeds per cell, and then transplants each just-rooted cluster two or three weeks later.

He calls it multisowing, and he does it with beets, too — and radishes, turnips, scallions, onions, leeks, spinach and many salad plants, if he plans to harvest smaller leaves rather than whole heads.

“I transplant small, the idea being that there’s less transplant shock,” he said. “And it’s not actually much longer or harder work than sowing direct.”





Turnips that were multisown in the greenhouse were transplanted in little groupings. “I think it’s like a kind of companion planting,” Mr. Dowding said. Jonathan Buckley

But transplanting in clumps?

“I think it’s like a kind of companion planting,” he said. “They’re going in the ground with their mates; they’re the same little seedlings they’ve grown up with, to use human language. Think of the greenhouse as your kindergarten, and then you’re putting them out in the world.”

The sowing basically never stops at Homeacres, where there are always spaces available to be filled, and seeds to fill them: savoy cabbage seedlings ready to follow even before the onions are harvested, or leeks after the potatoes, or a row of carrots tucked between those of leaf lettuce.

“Always, for me, the golden rule is to have plants ready,” Mr. Dowding said. “So I keep propagating all year long.”

He added: “It’s better to prep a smaller area and do it more intensively. I’m finding that a one-inch layer of compost a year on this soil gives enough fertility for two, even three crops a year. There’s literally no growing time for a cover crop, and we don’t need it.”



The sowing basically never stops in the Homeacres greenhouse, because garden spaces are always coming open. Jonathan Buckley

One Potato, Two Potatoes

Mr. Dowding takes a distinctive approach with potatoes, too, ignoring the conventional advice to plant in trenches and then gradually hill the plants as they grow. (Hilling, as it's called, is normally accomplished by first backfilling the trenches and then by bringing in more loose soil to mound up around the vines, so the potatoes can develop underneath.)

At Homeacres, each seed potato is tucked into a slit carefully made by pushing a trowel straight down into the soil and then pulling it toward you, positioning the potato with at least two inches of soil on top.

At the usual first hilling time, Mr. Dowding pulls a little nearby compost around each plant in a mini-mound, later adding more from the heap as the plants need hilling again.

"Potatoes take a little more compost than other vegetables," he said. "But it's a long-term benefit, because subsequent crops grow

more strongly.”



Instead of hilling his potatoes, Mr. Dowding pulls a little nearby compost around each plant, in a mini-mound. When the plants need hilling again, he adds more compost from the heap. Jonathan Buckley

Common-Sense Composting

The compost Mr. Dowding’s system relies on can be “anything decomposed,” from leaves to chipped, woody bits. Perfection is not the goal.

A recent student lamented that he could not make compost, and hoped to learn how.

“After he’d seen my compost heaps, which are not perfect, he said, ‘I’m doing all right,’” Mr. Dowding recalled. “It can be slightly lumpy, a little woody, whatever. Don’t worry about setting the bar too high.”

But there are a few guidelines he does follow.

Because an active heap resulting in quality compost comes from a mix of browns and greens — carbon-rich, fibrous materials and fresher, nitrogen-rich ones — collect some browns alongside the pile in fall, when they are plentiful. Dried leaves, twiggy trimmings and even paper or cardboard will do.

“You’re going to be putting a lot of green in all summer,” he said. “So make sure you have a stockpile of brown to balance it.”

Turn the heap once a year — that’s enough, he said.

Also important: Don’t pile up everything into a mound or mountain. “For me, one golden rule is keep the heap level,” he said. Otherwise, layering the browns and greens can be challenging.

It took many years for these long-held ideas, which make so much sense to him, to catch on the way they have recently. And he wonders why.

So that the next generations aren’t so slow on the uptake, the latest [Garden, and a door of the same name](#).

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The Joys of Gardening

Whether you’re limited to an apartment window box or looking to start a backyard vegetable garden, these tips can help.

Want a garden that doesn’t involve any tilling or soil preparation? A recent article of the “no-dig” method [explains how you can make it work](#).

Container gardening is all about strategic plant placement. [Follow these guiding](#)

- Need ideas for a small space? With a few containers, some good soil and plenty of sunlight, [you can grow a garden just about anywhere](#).

at night, you can grow a garden just about anywhere.

- In a fast-shifting climate putting diversity at risk, it's never been more urgent to propagate native plants. [These tips can help.](#)
 - Some of the most visually appealing tropical plants are also delicious. [Here's how to choose — and grow — the best ones.](#)
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