

NO-Dig Gardening

For the past 25 years or so, some serious gardeners have been quietly adhering to no-dig gardening. A method where, wait for it, there's no digging. Beds are laid out and left completely undisturbed for as long as you use them. The only thing you do is plant in them, harvest from them and, once a year, put down 1" to 2" of new compost on top of them. You don't even dig it in. You just layer it on top like lettuce on a sandwich.

And that's really all there is to it. You don't dig your soil and you spread a couple of inches of compost on top of it every fall or spring.

Proponents of no-dig gardening say that it's not only the easiest way to garden, it's also the best way to garden.

I've been no-dig gardening for a few years and so far, I love it. I'm not opposed to digging in it. But in the spring, there is so much to do to get a vegetable garden ready, being able to eliminate one hugely time-consuming task (digging up beds) is thrilling. There's more time for starting seeds and planting out and building that hog-panel squash arbor I always say I'm several free hours to do it if I want to.

- Requires less time and manual labor than a dug garden.
- Soil that is firm, not airy and fluffy, is better for plant roots. They'll grow stronger and give the plant the support it needs to grow tall, strong and sturdy.
- Soil is full of beneficial things. The less you disturb them, the better the soil will be. Tilling the earth is like someone bulldozing your house every spring. You completely ruin the structure.
- Nope, you don't even need to use a broad fork. Again, your soil doesn't need to be aerated and fiddled with. That's what plant roots and worms are for. They tunnel into the earth, creating lovely aeration year after year.
- Digging up and turning over soil exposes more of it to the air and sun, which kills the microbes you so desperately need for healthy earth.
- Mother Nature has never once been seen in the spring or fall out with a shovel hacking up the forests of the world. Ground is left untouched, leaves fall on top, decompose into compost and feed the soil beneath. That's the same principle behind no-dig gardening. Add 2" of compost on top of the soil every year and that's it.
- No dig means fewer weeds. Digging up and turning over earth exposes weed seeds to their best friends – the top of the soil and the sun. They then happily grow at an alarming rate.
- The longer you adhere to no dig, the better your soil structure will become without having to do anything to it, other than adding compost once a year. Better soil structure creates healthier, more disease-resistant plants.

So How Do You Start One Of These No-Dig Beds?

Simply don't dig this spring when you're getting your garden ready. Instead gently rake out the top so it's relatively even and put a couple of inches of good-quality compost on it. Rake because that's what seeds will grow best in.

Then just leave your garden alone. Pull weeds as you see them. As the years go by, you'll find fewer and fewer weeds.

If you have an especially weedy bed, add an initial layer of 6" of compost to your garden instead of 2". This will help smother the weed seeds. Weeds can grow out of 2" of compost no problem, but they have a much harder time growing out of 6".

I was afraid that by adding 2" of compost every year, I was going to end up with garden beds that were as high as my waist. But the soil settles as the year progresses and you don't end up with mountainous beds.

A lot of no-dig gardeners have also abandoned encasing their raised beds in wood. After doing away with them last year, I'll be bringing them back this spring. They're expensive and prone to rotting away after a few years, but having them on your raised beds eliminates weeds from growing out the sides of the beds and also keeps your compost in place. If your raised beds are only a couple of inches, this shouldn't be an issue for you; but if they're 6" or so high like mine, then erosion after rains can be a problem.

I can't give you an analysis of how this no-dig method works after 10 or 25 years, but I can tell you after the few years I've been doing it, I have no complaints at all. I wouldn't say I've had any huge increase in production of vegetables but who cares because I haven't seen any decrease in production either.

This article was edited for brevity for publication on our web site.

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