

BUSHY PARK ALLOTMENTS – ADVICE NOTE 8

TO DIG OR NOT TO DIG? THAT IS THE QUESTION

If you've heard about 'no-dig' gardening, perhaps your ears pricked up at the prospect that this arduous chore could be ignored. Or perhaps you dismissed it as nonsense and anyway, you like digging.

Either way, it **is** an option, and may appeal to those who dislike digging or help those who are unable to dig, for whatever reason, to continue gardening without it.

What exactly is 'no-dig' gardening?

Many gardeners want to sow, plant and nurture in sympathy with nature. But where in nature do you find the kind of digging that gardeners do, rather than moles and other animals burrowing into the ground? Far from benefitting the soil, digging can damage its structure and bury topsoil, bringing less nutritious subsoil to the top.

In the wild as plants grow and die, leaves and debris are dropped onto the soil surface, where they decay, or are taken down into the soil by worms. This creates a fertile surface layer where plants can thrive.

'No-dig' gardeners broadly follow this action by adding compost to the soil surface.

But don't take the term too literally! Many cultural operations do require a fork or trowel. Potatoes and root crops require lifting, bulbs need burying, and planting can't be done without digging a hole. However, most of this cultivation is done near the surface. Maintenance tasks, such as weeding, can be carried out with a hoe and a rake, which also breaks up the top soil.

Advocates of 'no-dig' gardening agree that soil needs to be in good condition before you can hang up your spade. So if you have a very overgrown plot, dig once, but deep and thoroughly (double digging if you have the energy), remove all perennial weed roots (as far as possible) and that should be sufficient.

A 'no-dig' piece of land should never have its soil exposed to the elements. If there isn't anything growing, mulch, mulch, mulch and mulch some more! Manure, compost, autumn leaves, grass cuttings and hay/straw will all help to preserve the structure, nutrients, moisture and temperature of your soil, and prevent weed seeds from settling and taking root.

Even if you can't get your hands on suitable organic matter, a 'floating mulch' such as plastic sheeting or horticultural membrane will do the trick just as well and can be re-used each year. Alternatively, instead of leaving bare, exposed soil, sow green manures in late summer/early autumn; not only will these give the required protection, but can also add nutrients to the soil.

Generally speaking, 'no-dig' works best in conjunction with organic and wildlife friendly gardening systems. A hands-off approach, allowing nature to do what it does best, is the bottom line.

For example, if you regularly use copper sulphate (Bordeaux Mixture) to prevent blight affecting your tomato crop, it's likely that you've decimated your worm population, which is your army of diggers!

Or, if you regularly use a brand of slug pellets which isn't approved for organic gardening, then you'll not only wipe out the slugs and snails, but also thrushes and hedgehogs, natural predators of these.

If every time you see an aphid, you reach for the relevant spray gun, then you're effectively removing the food supply of ladybird and lacewing larvae, which would have done that job for you!

And if you rake, burn, chop and prune everything to within an inch of its life each autumn, you're removing the habitats of overwintering beetles, moth and butterfly caterpillars and countless other beneficial creatures who will happily chomp their way through all your pests come spring!

In a nutshell...

PROS	CONS
Banish backbreaking work	Reduced opportunity for exercise
Preserve soil structure	Soil born creatures, such as worms, break down clumps of soil etc, but it is slower
Reduce exposure and activation of deeply buried weed seeds	Roots of pernicious weeds, eg couch grass, columbine etc need to be removed at the beginning
Saves time and effort which could be directed into another activity	May feel loss of outdoor winter activity
Preserves top soil and therefore, soil nutrients	Need access to organic matter for mulch
Increases soil flora and fauna	May find a few less welcome creatures moving in! (but natural predators can remove those for you)
Helps to increase balance of pest / predator ratio in an organic garden which reduces or eliminates costly and harmful pest control.	Takes time for the balance to be restored. Patience required!

As an example one tenant's plot was dug over thoroughly 6 years ago, and since then the fork has barely been near the soil, apart from digging the odd trench for beans or potatoes (one spit deep only). Weeds are hoed or trowelled out. The soil is always covered and they barely use any form of pesticide.

"It took tolerance and patience initially. Now we see aphids appear and disappear without our intervention and slugs are a welcome meal for thrushes, wrens, and robins in our brassica beds and the toads in the potato beds. By working with nature instead of battling against it, we have more time to nurture our crops and less weeding is required in the summer months. It really is worth it."

Quote from a Bushy Park Tenant