



# GARDENING

Anne Swithinbank meets a gardener who says there is no need to dig your beds



● EARTH WORKS: Charles Dowding says you can grow crops without digging the soil

## It may be time to hang up your spade

**G**ROWING vegetables in our allotments and kitchen gardens has never been more popular, but are you fed up with the seemingly endless cycle of digging and weeding, not to mention beating back armies of slugs? It is possible to harvest fresh, tasty and organically-raised crops with less effort and the secrets lie in a new book called *Organic Gardening The Natural No-Dig Way*, by Charles Dowding (published by Dartington-based Green Books, priced £10.95).

I first met Charles back in the 1980s when Geoff Hamilton and I presented an entire *Gardeners' World* programme from his organic vegetable farm in Somerset. The crops grew on beds that were never dug, but dressed with layers of well-rotted compost or manure instead.

Back then, Charles virtually invented the vegetable box scheme, but before it really took off, he moved to France, where he met and married his wife Susie and developed a self-sufficient lifestyle surrounded by vines, crops and livestock. Eight years ago, the Dowdings returned to

Shepton Montague, and Charles has set up another vegetable garden on a smaller scale. Nevertheless, from just over an acre of ground and with only a small greenhouse and modest polytunnel at his disposal, he sells around 150 bags of leaf salad a week, writes passionately about his subject, and runs courses.

Sometimes we have to ask ourselves why we slavishly follow a tradition like digging, when in some ways, it makes no sense.

**If we stop turning the soil over so often, fewer weed seeds will come to the surface**

Most garden soil has good potential and we dig it to loosen it up, add compost or manure for our crops and lever up huge clumps of creeping buttercup and other weeds.

But if we didn't trample all over our soil, we wouldn't need to loosen it – the solution is to create permanent, slightly raised 1.2m-wide beds with paths between them.



● GET GROWING: Organic salads basking in the protection of the polytunnel

**YOUR CHANCE TO WIN A BOOK**

WE have three copies of *Organic Gardening The Natural No-Dig Way* by Charles Dowding to give away in this reader competition. Just send the correct answer to the question below, with your name, address and daytime telephone number to Organic Gardening Book Competition, Weekend, WMN, 17 Beest Road, Plymouth PL6 5AA, to arrive no later than Monday, April 23 2007. Usual WMN terms and conditions apply.

**Which traditional gardening activity is largely rejected by Charles Dowding as he raises crops organically with less effort?**



JOHN SWITHINBANK

If we then add a layer of compost to the surface in autumn, the worms will mix it into the top layers by spring, thereby removing the need for digging. And if we stop turning the soil over so often, fewer weed seeds will come to the surface and grow. Makes you think doesn't it?

I used no-dig beds in my last garden and they worked really well – but since moving to Devon we started digging again and have literally lost the plot. It's jolly hard work, upsets the soil and I'd like to stop.

A visit to Charles' garden was all I needed to convince me to hang up my spade. The main disciplines are to add compost in good time, ideally a couple of months before planting or sowing will take place, spreading it 5cm deep and reaching in to pull up weeds while they are still small. Do that and life suddenly becomes much easier. When extra-fine tilths are needed at the surface for carrot and parsnip sowing, simply use an old bed where most of the compost has been dragged down and incorporated by worms, leaving a finer texture.

I also realised I've been mixing too many flowers and herbs in with the crops, making hiding places for slugs. The biggest deterrent for them is the

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light, dry crumbly surface of compost in between the crops. Access to generous amounts of compost may be a stumbling block, so Charles suggests ordering the fine, 8mm grade from your local recycling centre.

In the bowls, sections follow on what to grow, with detailed information on how to grow it. The proof is there to see in the garden, where even back in March results were impressive. A surprising number of crops are started in the greenhouse, in modules stood on a heated bench.

These are planted out into beds, avoiding the need for direct sowing and thinning. Less seed is needed and the young plants have developed enough to withstand slugs.

On my visit, salads from September sowings were basking in the protection of the polytunnel, where outer leaves will be continuously gathered until June. I admired the flavour and appearance of variegated land cress, mustards, Lettuce Grenoble Red, leaf radish, red rib dandelion, and pea tips, vowing to try some in my mini polytunnel for next winter. The secret here is good spacing, usually 10-12in between plants. They are living off the compost added for last summer's tomato crop.



When these salads are finished, more compost will be added for this season's planting of tomatoes, aubergines and cucumbers.

But you don't need a polytunnel to grow winter salads. By sowing from late July to early August, you could be harvesting hardy lettuce varieties, rocket, lamb's lettuce and mustards like Red Giant and Golden Streaks grown outdoors. Now's a good time to make lists and source seeds.

Cutting out or at least cutting down on digging (even Charles admits that potatoes grow better in loosened soil) is such an attractive prospect that I've already made some 1.2m-wide beds for this season's crops. After they've been harvested, I'll spread compost, sit back – and hopefully never dig them again!

● To order your copy of *Organic Gardening The Natural No-Dig Way* at the special offer price of £8.95 plus free postage and packing, phone 0845 4589910 quoting the *Western Morning News Reader Offer for Organic Gardening*. All major credit cards are accepted.



● TOP OF THE CROPS: Clockwise from top left: Well-rotted compost is used in the no-dig process; onions are just one of the veg that Charles grows using the no-dig process; germinated chard seedlings poke through the soil; young swiss chard plants grow well in the no-dig soil



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