

Leave that spade alone

It's a dream come true: you don't need to dig over your garden patch to guarantee bumper crops. Veg guru Charles Dowding explains all.

Why are vegetable gardens normally dug? Why not dig the lawn as well? Sometimes we work in a habitual way, while there are much better methods freely available, and I want to explain the essence of *not* digging so that you can save time and grow healthier, more nutritious fruit and vegetables. I have been cropping my current plot for nine years (and others for longer) without digging, or rotovating, or working the soil in any way except for light hoeing. My harvests are excellent.

Compost on Top

The essence of no-dig is to spread, every year, 25-50mm of good compost on top of the soil (not incorporated). Compost feeds worms and they do the digging, as they travel up and down in search of it. After eating a combination of organic matter and soil, they excrete worm-casts which contain valuable plant food, and possess a crumbly structure which helps the soil to develop a healthy porosity.

This way of working also helps soil hang onto its humid state for longer, so that watering is less necessary than on a cultivated plot, where the soil has been "aerated" and any compost or manure has been incorporated.

A further benefit is the preservation and enhancement of all life in the soil. We have allowed chemists to brainwash us into thinking in terms of "nutrients in – nutrients out", making us reliant on their offerings of fertilisers. My experience suggests that soil often contains plenty of nutrients, as long as we encourage sufficient fungi and bacteria to help our plant roots to extract and use them.

What about weeds?

A further advantage is that not digging encourages better management of weeds. There is no longer the option of letting them go wild after vegetables are harvested, for a later digging in. Instead, keep the soil clean by hoeing, hand-weeding and, best of all, by continual cropping. For instance, plant some endives or radicchio once onions have been harvested in August, or some leeks after broad beans. The absence of weeds means less slugs, which have less leaves as shelter to keep moist under. Then after a year of allowing no weeds to seed, you will suddenly realise that a lot less are germinating, so it becomes a lot easier and more enjoyable to grow all plants.

Garden to a Calendar

This long word means, simply, that working in closer harmony with changing weather and day lengths will result in healthier harvests.

Salads give several examples of this. Many leaves are unsuitable for sowing in May because days are still growing longer and they are programmed to make flower and set

seed in such conditions. Mizuna, corn salad (lamb's lettuce), pak choi, rocket, mustards and most endives will make few worthwhile leaves from May sowings before starting to send up a flowering stem. Whereas if they are sown in early July, as days begin to shorten, leaf production becomes their priority. Best results now often come from early August sowings, as the climate is a little warmer almost every year, allowing later sowing.

What to sow now?

The best salads to sow in May are lettuces, chards and spinach, together with herbs such as dill, basil and coriander. Lettuces are definitely healthiest and loveliest at this time of year, the leaves here at the moment appear to have been polished. They are all shapes, colours, textures and flavours. Here are a few of my favourite varieties.

Bijou, *Redina* and *Nymans* all have deep red leaves whose crimson allure will enhance any salad bowl.

Bergamo offers bright green, frilly leaves and crops for a long time before seeding.

Grenoble Red is a 'batavian bronze' variety which resists slugs, crops heavily, has thick leaves and tastes good.

Chartwell and *Rubens* have upright cos leaves of dark green and bronze colour respectively.

Freckles boasts a pretty mottled effect with varying shades of maroon on light green.

One Heart or Regular Leaves?

All these lettuces, spaced about 250mm (10") apart, will make hearts of varied density if kept growing for eight to ten weeks from sowing. Alternatively they can be picked over a longer period for a more regular supply of leaves. Simply twist off the larger, outer leaves as they develop, always leaving the rosette of three to five small leaves at each plant's centre. *Ed:* (The photos may help to demonstrate this). Using this method, I start picking leaves off four to five week old plants and keep picking leaves every two or three days for up to two and a half months, all off the same plants. Much time and effort of re-sowing and waiting for new hearts is thus avoided.

Salad for small spaces

For the ultimate in simplicity, plant a large container or trough with twelve to twenty lettuce, of as many varieties as you like or can find. Once established, each plant should grow at the rate of one leaf per day, to provide the basis of many salads for two months or more. Another container with some herbs for interesting flavours and colours, such as basil, coriander, orache and amaranth, will enhance the range of taste and texture.

Then in late June or early July, plant some more lettuce in a different container, and follow the first ones as they rise to seed, in mid to late July, with some endives and chicories for the stronger late summer flavours.

Just like a larger vegetable bed, you can make a container work hard for you. No digging required.