

No dig gardening

THIS MONTH: Charles Dowding's courses on growing without digging!

Regular readers of this magazine will be familiar with gardening expert, Charles Dowding, and his increasingly popular no dig approach. For the past 10 years Charles has also been running courses from Homeacres, his working market garden in Somerset, so I figured it was high time I speak to the good man himself to find out more.

Charles told me it was after his first book came in 2007, and he started getting asked by gardeners about courses, that things really took off on the training side. Nowadays Charles runs both day and more intensive weekend courses throughout the year and is keen to show how you can grow some of your own food "productively, healthily and with a lot less effort".

His weekend market gardener course is also designed to show the methods and details for growing, picking and selling a crop of value on a regular basis and Charles is generous with his knowledge. "In 2002 I almost gave up market gardening, when Riverford were seducing all my customers with more fancy veg and prices that I couldn't match," he said. "Then a local retailer suggested salad bags. I could easily grow them - mixed leaves, washed and bagged - and found they sell for much more than say a head of lettuce, because it's like a convenience food/ready meal for the customer. There is a nice element of surprise as to contents, because my leaves change every week with the season. I think salad bags offer perhaps the only chance for small growers to earn a wage... unless you are very young, strong and have access to an acre of prime land and a local big market!"



Participants with Charles, centre, on a recent course

Tireless work

Many celebrity gardeners now practice a no-dig approach and this is thanks in main to Charles's tireless work over the years and his many books and articles on the subject. It's worth also noting that his tactics can just as effectively be applied to ornamentals and trees. In fact tree pruning is also one of the areas covered in Charles's courses alongside everything else you could possibly need to know to help you on your way.

Charles told me he loves teaching courses and in particular seeing participants' confidence and enthusiasm grow

throughout the day. By the end they can't wait to get going with all they've learnt. "Occasionally we have digging sceptics who are brought along by their spouses, for example. It's a joy to see the veils lift and how they see, from the success of my garden, ways that they can apply these methods at home.

"I also love how everyone appreciates the food. Steph makes

amazing dishes, in huge quantity and variety, and people are often blown away by the spread. It's worthy of a top restaurant and more, because the ingredients have so much flavour, all from the garden. Participants realise that they can do this too! We have had several people who started the meal 'never eating beetroot' and finish the meal loving it!"

It sounds as though gardeners with all levels of experience stand to learn from the myriad of time-saving and productive growing methods demonstrated...

Course details

Charles runs courses throughout the year, each with a seasonal focus around what's happening on the farm at the time. His one day course starts at 10.30am and runs through to 4pm. It costs £115 and includes all refreshments and Steph's amazing lunch.

The next weekend market gardener courses are being run on April 15/16, August 26/27 and November 11/12 and costs £230.

Charles has also just launched a new Vegetable Garden Diary.



Putting fleece back on a raised bed