



To dig or not to dig

Planting in sheet mulch. **Photograph:** Keith Rowley

Lynn O’Keeffe-Lascar continues her series on gardening for wildlife. In this instalment she introduces the concept of “no-dig” gardening, which is especially popular with environmentally-friendly gardeners.

NUTAN PHOTOGRAPHY



In this and subsequent issues I’m going to give you advice to help you create a beautiful ornamental garden that will provide food and shelter for birds and other wild creatures, with only some nettles and brambles! By making some simple changes or

plant choices you can easily, and in any space, grow food and habitat for wildlife.

No-dig gardening

Have you heard of no-dig gardening? Well, it sounds great. Digging surely is the one bit of gardening that most people hate, leaving the back and shoulders aching, and it puts many people off even starting a garden or growing a few vegetables. So, what if you didn’t have to dig at all?

Some benefits of no-dig gardening are obvious – a lot less hard work for starters – but others are more subtle. A healthy soil has structure: organic matter is found closest to the surface and many soil organisms such as worms eat and digest the dead plant material they find there and pull it down into the soil, converting it to food for plants and leaving behind tunnels that are good for drainage and aeration.

For many years, the received wisdom was that it was best to dig soil – even double-dig it – mixing up the soil, adding in manure and breaking it up. Now we understand that soil has beneficial mycorrhizal fungi that help plants to grow, and that repeated rotavating and digging kills off fungi, earthworms and other useful soil creatures. So, not digging is healthier for the soil, soil flora and fauna, and for the plants that grow in the soil.

Create your no-dig garden

So, how do you create a no-dig garden of your own? Well, there are lots of ideas in books and on the web, and I’ve tried a few of these with varying degrees of success. Mostly, no-dig gardening involves lots of **mulching** of soil, rather than hoeing and weeding.

Some concepts involve **no-soil gardening**, with nothing to dig: for example, **straw-bale gardens**. I live on the edge of the Burren, so I have very little soil to begin with, and any system that builds up soil rather than wears it out sounds good to me.

The first thing to bear in mind is that most no-dig gardens begin with a really thorough digging. No amount of mulching is going to prevent perennial weeds like docks and thistles from growing, so you have to dig out all these weeds and solve any drainage or compaction issues first.

After that, whether you use raised beds or not, do not stand on the soil and only ever work the top of the soil lightly with a fork or hand trowel, without turning the sod over:

Mulching

Apply regular mulches of organic material – such as well-rotted manure, kitchen compost, worm compost, grass clippings, straw and spent mushroom compost – to the surface and plant through this. You can cover the soil with the mulch to prevent weeds from growing and allow the worms to work the material down into the soil.

The main drawback to this method is that slugs and snails just love hiding in mulch in our damp climate. Even in a polytunnel it can be problematic. I tried a straw mulch for the path in a tunnel, and the slug population mushroomed. So, mulch should not be



Robins love mulch! All those creepy-crawlies to feed on. **Photo:** Michael Finn

applied when growing salads or cabbages, which slugs love.

It does work really well, however; with fruit bushes, raspberries, fruit trees and ornamental shrubs –*better than a black plastic ground cover*.

This way, you can feed and improve the soil over the years, yielding better crops and flowers, unlike when you grow through plastic and lose contact with the soil.

Don't expect your mulch to look neat and tidy, though; various birds love throwing the mulch over their shoulder when hunting for bugs and worms.

Also, Creeping Buttercup has a knack for spreading over the top of any mulch within a week, so if you have that cheerful little weed in your garden, you'll see plenty of it.

No-soil gardening

Some of the methods for no-soil gardening that I've tried have included straw-bale gardening and building raised beds on my lawn.

Raised beds

If your lawn is good quality grass you can create a raised bed on it by simply covering the grass with newspaper or cardboard and then putting topsoil and composts directly on top of it.

Over the first season the newspaper and grass will rot down and the worms will work the rest out for you. I have done this for raised beds and even in my tunnel, and it has worked really well, with very few weeds making it up through the layer of newspaper and topsoil.

Straw-bale gardening

The idea behind straw-bale gardening is that



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Beds of onions and potatoes raised into mounds to maximise irrigation and exposure to sunlight.

you can grow crops in a straw bale as it rots down. You tie as many straw bales as you have on their edge, side by side, scoop out an indentation along the top, a couple of inches deep (a lot harder to do than it sounds), soak the bales thoroughly and fill the indentation with topsoil or potting compost and sow a pea crop first.

Peas can fix their own nitrogen and can grow in conditions of low fertility. These can be followed by salads or, as the bale begins to warm up as it rots, courgettes or squash.

I have found, however, that slugs eat the peas and salads. Also, the bale just gets wetter and never warms up, so the squash are miserable.

I did manage to grow some potatoes in it in the second year as it fell apart, and the area it was on became a new vegetable bed the year after, but overall I think our climate is too cold and damp for this one.

Trial and error

Each garden soil and situation is different, so what didn't work for me may well work

for you, and vice versa. One of the more satisfying things about gardening is trying out new methods and plants and combinations.

Further information

● Follow **Oisín K** on Twitter ([@BiaOisín](https://twitter.com/BiaOisín)) or on Facebook (Bia Oisín). Oisín is a commercial no-dig vegetable grower in Claregalway, Co Galway.

● **Charles Dowding** has a website (www.charlesdowding.co.uk) and an excellent book with lots of information on organic no-dig methods.

● **Lynn O'Keeffe-Lascar** is an outreach horticulturist based in Co Galway and an OPW gardener at Portumna Castle Gardens. She is involved in school and community gardening, teaching adults and transition-year students and helping Tidy Towns groups. She can be contacted at lynnsirishgardens@gmail.com or you can send her a tweet at [@OkeeffeLynn](https://twitter.com/OkeeffeLynn).

● See the *Garden Bird Year* blog by BirdWatch Ireland's Oran O'Sullivan at <http://gardenbirdyear.blogspot.ie>.

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Inside my no-dig tunnel today. Last year, this was just lawn, which I covered with newspaper, kitchen compost and some topsoil.



Red currants grown through thick mulch – not exactly weed-free! I've netted the bushes with crop cover, much safer for birds than green fruit netting.

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