

Notes from the Garden Club Meeting 5th November 2025

No Dig Gardening

An excellent presentation on the practical aspects of No-Dig gardening was given by Francesca Clair from NESCAN (North East Scotland Climate Action Network).

There are a couple of good reasons why No-Dig is of interest notably:-

1. In the long run it requires less work. No heavy digging is required and the amount of weeding is significantly reduced, as digging will unearth dormant weed seeds and stimulate them into growth. The only downside workwise is the initial setting up of the no-dig beds.
2. No-dig does not disturb the life already resident in the soil, including fungal root systems, and it does not disturb the soil's existing structure. Compost and well rotted manure added to the surface of the beds will help feed the life existing in the soil and over time this will improve the solids fertility and drainage.

It is important to note No-dig will not work well on a new build house site, as the existing soil structure will have been severely damaged during the house building process.

The process of setting up no-dig beds is as follows:-

1. Cut back to ground level all plants and grasses in the area to be renovated. Remove woody plants (eg brambles) and as much of perennial weed tap roots (docks and dandelions) as possible. Francesca also removed most but not all of rosebay willow herb roots from her no dig polytunnel.
2. Flatten the surface of the area using top soil, or slice off the humps in the surface to fill in hollows.
3. Lay a double layer of squashed cardboard boxes over the whole area. DO NOT butt joint the cardboard. Always overlapping the edges between the boxes by at least a hand's breadth. Large boxes, such as bike or furniture boxes made with corrugated cardboard, are the most successful. All sellotape/gaffer tape needs to be peeled off - this is best done when the cardboard is damp. Staples need to be removed. Ink on cardboard is soya based and glues are now mainly water based, so the risk from chemicals associated with the cardboard are reduced/low.

4. Once the cardboard has been laid out, start from one edge and use wooden planks to help set out the veg beds and paths.

Paths should be wide enough for one person and a wheelbarrow, (Charles Dowding, a renowned author on this subject, suggests 16" or 40cm), and should be laid using well compressed wood chips that have been left some time to mature (Charles Dowding suggests about 3cm or 1.25" deep). It was noted that Francesca ran paths all the way around the outer edges of the cardboard she used as well as between her veg beds. This should help keep perennial weeds from spreading into the veg beds from outside the cardboard protected area, provided the paths are kept weeded throughout the growing season.

Veg beds should be wide enough to be able to work on them from the paths, without walking on the beds, (Charles Dowding suggests 4 to 5 feet / 1.2m to 1.5m as being his preferred size). Francesca's veg beds were made from 1foot /30cm of well compacted compost using the wooden planks to hold the compost in place while she

trod the compost down, in a similar way to compacting the soil before seeding a lawn. She then finished the bed off with a layer of well rotted manure, before moving the wooden planks on, to form the adjacent path and veg bed. This method uses the wooden planks only to set out the beds, she also differs from Charles Dowding in using a thicker layer of compost and a manure layer as a mulch. This method has paid dividends this last year as she has had a successful growing year, whilst not having to water!

Important notes include

- Use plug plants in the veg beds, you either buy in or grow plants from seeds you sow under cover in seed trays, have pricked out and then grown on in pots. The only exception according to Charles Dowding could be planting carrot and parsnip seeds, as both of these dislike root disturbance.
- Weed plants, especially couch grasses and weeds with tap roots like dandelion and dock, can push through the cardboard layer. These need to be pulled out as soon as you see them.
- Winter maintenance is very important. Weed and put a top up layer of 1.25" or 3cm of compost on all the veg beds. Similarly, weed and top up the woodchip on the paths.
- Separate no-dig beds can be used for growing perennial veg and fruits, as well as fruit trees.
- Use green manures on resting veg beds to prevent the compost being exposed. Cut the green manure down before it sets seed and leave the debris on the surface rather than digging it in.
- It is possible to grow gourmet mushrooms in the woodchip paths.
- It is also possible to grow tatties in a no-dig bed, "earth them up" by simply adding more compost to the bed.
- The best time to create a no-dig bed is over Winter, so that when Spring comes round you are ready to go. Remember though to cover bare soil.

Useful book and web site

Books : No Dig by Charles Dowding Published 2022 by Dorling Kindersley

Back Garden Seed Saving by Sue Strickland Published 2008 by Eco-Logic Books

Fruit and Vegetables for Scotland: What to grow and how to grow it by Kenneth Cox and Caroline Beaton Published 2012 (RePrinted 2020) by Birlinn

Web site : charlesdowding.co.uk

YouTube channel :Charles Dowding

