



No Dig Gardening

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No Dig Gardening

Retire the spade. Feed the soil instead.



No Dig Gardening UK :

No dig gardening means exactly what it says: instead of digging or forking the soil over, you spread a layer of compost on the surface each year and plant straight into it, letting worms and soil life do the mixing. To start a bed, lay plain cardboard over the ground, even over grass and weeds, top it with 10 to 15cm of compost, and plant. The method suppresses weeds, holds moisture, improves any soil type from the top down, and replaces the hardest job in gardening with the easiest.

I came to no dig sceptical, if I am honest. Twenty years of Oxfordshire clay had taught me that autumn digging was simply what serious gardeners did, and the first bed I converted was half an experiment and half laziness after a bad back put the spade out of reach one October. That bed outgrew its dug neighbours the following summer and has done every year since, and my plot has been converting itself bed by bed ever since.

This guide covers how the no dig method works, exactly how to start a bed, the honest question of where all the compost comes from, and how it behaves on clay, slopes, allotments and problem ground.

What the No Dig Method Actually Is

The no dig method rests on one idea: soil is not an inert material to be turned over but a living structure, full of fungal networks, worm channels and stable crumbs that took years to build.

Digging smashes that structure, brings buried weed seeds up to germinate, and burns off organic matter by flooding the soil with air. Leaving it alone and feeding it from above, the way woodland soil feeds itself with leaf litter, preserves the structure and lets soil life carry nutrients down for you. It is not a new idea, and it is not complicated, and the reason it has taken over UK allotments in the last decade is embarrassingly simple: it works, and it is far less work. If you want the full dug-versus-undug reasoning before committing, should you dig your garden soil weighs it properly, and this article is the practical half of that pair.

How to Start a No Dig Bed (On Grass, Weeds or Bare Soil)



Cardboard over the grass, 10 to 15cm of compost on top, plant the same day.

The classic start, and still the best, goes straight on top of grass or weeds with no clearing at all. Mow or trample the growth flat. Lay plain brown cardboard over the whole area, tape and staples removed, overlapping the sheets by 15cm or so, because light sneaking through the gaps is how weeds survive. Water the cardboard well so it moulds to the ground. Then spread 10 to 15cm of compost on top, firm it lightly with the back of a rake, and plant. That is the entire job. The cardboard blocks light long enough to kill the grass and weeds beneath, then rots away within months, by which time the smothered growth below has become worm food and the bed is simply deep compost sitting on improving soil.

You can plant the same day you build the bed, which surprises people. Anything raised from plants, courgettes, brassicas, lettuce, goes straight into the compost layer. Direct sowing works too once the layer is settled, though big seeds like beans appreciate a week or two of settling first. On already-bare, reasonably clean soil you can skip the cardboard entirely and just spread the compost; the cardboard is a weed-suppression layer, not a magic ingredient. Edges are the one detail worth getting right: grass creeps sideways into an unedged bed, so cut a clean edge with a half-moon tool or run the beds inside timber sides if you prefer the look.



Plants go straight into the compost layer, even on day one.

The Honest Part: How Much Compost, and Where From
Here is the question every no dig guide skirts around: that first 10 to 15cm layer is a lot of compost. A bed of 1.2 by 2.4 metres needs roughly 300 to 400 litres, which is five to eight bulk bags of bought compost, and a whole allotment converted at once would cost a small fortune in 50-litre bags. The realistic answers, in the order I would use them: buy compost loose by the bulk bag or trailer load from a local supplier, where a cubic metre costs a fraction of the bagged price; use well-rotted manure from a local stables, free or nearly free in most of the country if you will shift it yourself; ring your council about green waste compost, which many sell cheaply by the bag or load and which is perfectly good for the base layer; and grow into it by converting two or three beds a year rather than the whole plot at once, which is what I did and what your own compost heap can eventually keep up with.



Buy it loose or by the bulk bag. Bagged compost maths does not work at this scale.

Quality matters less for the founding layer than people fear, because it is topping soil, not filling pots. Save your finest homemade compost for the annual top-up, which is far smaller: 2 to 5cm spread once a year, in late autumn or winter, is all an established no dig bed needs. That yearly mulch is the entire maintenance programme, and it replaces digging, most weeding and most feeding in one job.

No Dig on Clay, Slopes, Concrete and Problem Ground

No dig on clay soil is not just possible, it is where the method shows off, and my own plot is the proof I lean on. Clay's problem was never fertility but structure, and structure is exactly what digging wrecks and no dig protects.

The compost layer keeps you off the sticky surface, the worms open the clay from below, and beds that once glued themselves to my boots every March now plant like loam. If you are not sure what you are working with, check your soil type first, and badly compacted ground is the one case where a single initial forking to crack the pan, before the layers go on, earns its place.

Slopes work with the beds run across the slope rather than down it, so the compost does not migrate; on anything steep, timber edges hold the layers in place. Concrete and hard standing can carry a no dig bed too, it simply needs to be deeper, 25 to 30cm of material inside solid sides, and it will grow salads, herbs and shallow-rooted crops happily. Couch grass, bindweed and the other thugs are the honest exception to the plant-same-day promise: they will eventually push through a single cardboard layer, so for badly infested ground use a double layer of cardboard, be religious about the overlaps, and accept a season of pulling the survivors as they show. Even the thugs give up in year two; they are running on stored energy, and the light never comes.

No Dig on an Allotment



Beds this year, cardboard holding the rest until its turn comes.

Allotments are where UK no dig has genuinely boomed, and the method suits them perfectly because it solves the two classic allotment problems: taking on an overgrown plot, and keeping it manageable in the hours you actually have. Converting an overgrown plot is the standard start-on-weeds job scaled up, strim it down, cardboard the lot, and compost the beds you can afford this year while leaving the rest under cardboard and a scattering of anything organic until their turn comes. Lay the plot out in fixed beds around 1.2 metres wide, narrow enough to work from the paths, because never standing on the beds is half the method. Paths want woodchip over cardboard, which most councils and tree surgeons will deliver free, stays clean underfoot, and feeds the soil as it rots. A no dig allotment is not zero work, but the work moves to pleasant jobs, mulching, planting and picking, and the plot no longer punishes you for missing a fortnight.

Weeds, Year One, and What to Expect

The first year is the one that makes converts. Annual weeds, which live on disturbed soil, largely fail to appear at all, because nothing is disturbing the soil and their seeds stay buried. What weeding remains is minutes with a hoe on seedlings that pull from loose compost like hairs from butter. Moisture behaves differently too: the compost layer mulches the soil beneath, so no dig beds need noticeably less watering in a dry summer, and they take winter rain without capping or puddling. Crops in year one are usually good and in year two better, as the soil life builds; the only honest disappointments are deep-rooted parsnips and carrots in a brand-new bed sitting on heavy ground, which want either a deeper compost layer or a year of patience. Everything else, from potatoes planted into and covered with compost to brassicas firmed straight into the layer, simply grows, and the wider principles in improving garden soil and gardening for beginners apply unchanged, just with the spade retired.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is no dig gardening?

A method where you never dig or turn the soil. Instead you spread compost on the surface each year and plant into it, letting worms and soil life incorporate it naturally. It preserves soil structure, suppresses weeds, and replaces digging with a single annual mulch.

How do you start a no dig garden bed?

Flatten any grass or weeds, lay overlapping plain cardboard over the area, water it, then spread 10 to 15cm of compost on top and plant straight away. The cardboard kills the growth beneath by excluding light and rots away within months, leaving a clean, fertile bed.

How much compost does a no dig bed need?

Roughly 300 to 400 litres for a standard 1.2 by 2.4 metre bed at the start, which is why bulk-bag loads, local manure or council green waste compost beat bagged compost on cost. After the first year, a 2 to 5cm top-up once a year is all it takes.

Does no dig work on heavy clay soil?

Exceptionally well. Clay's weakness is structure, and no dig protects and builds structure while the compost layer keeps you off the sticky surface. Within a couple of seasons, worms working the compost downward make clay beds noticeably easier to plant and quicker to warm in spring.

Do weeds come through a no dig bed?

Annual weeds mostly stop appearing because the soil is never disturbed. Tough perennials like couch grass and bindweed can push through in year one on badly infested ground, so use a double cardboard layer there and pull survivors as they show. By the second season even these give up.

A Sensible Place to Start

Do not convert the garden; convert one bed. Cardboard, a boot-deep layer of the cheapest decent compost you can get in bulk, and whatever plants the season allows, then garden it alongside your dug beds for a year and let the comparison make the argument. That is how it won me over on clay I had been fighting for two decades, and one bed a year from now on is a perfectly respectable pace

How to Contact the Editor

If you have comments or you know I have given wrong advice then please contact me by email at

info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

If you have something to contribute or have a say on allotment life, then please use my email to send your contributions.

I am going to process the magazine issue once a month, so if there are comments you would like to make they can be answered in future editions.

I would like to add that most of the articles are taken off the web and some well known gardening and allotments magazines have been read in the making of our magazine content.

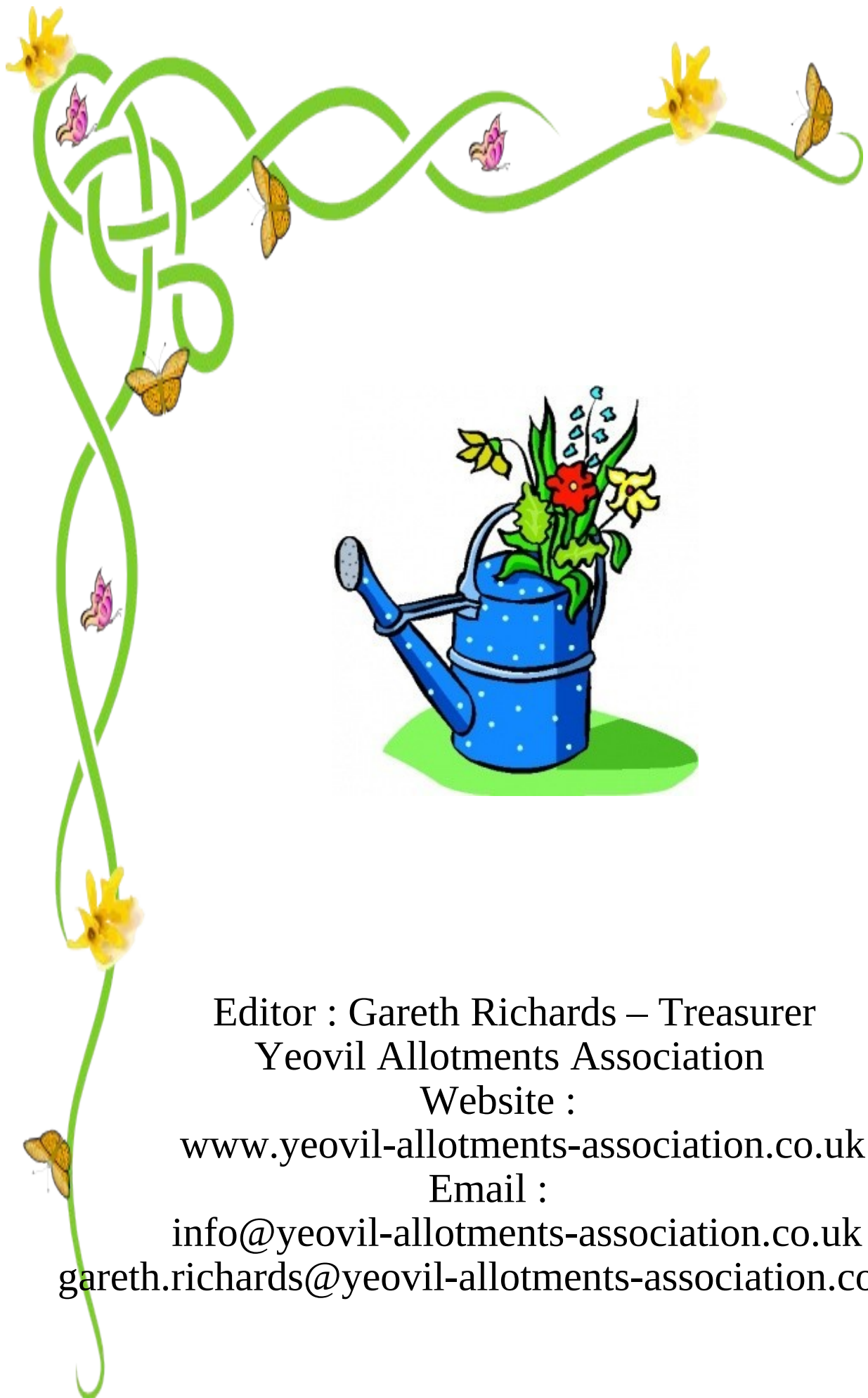
We also have our own website at :

www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenting and best wishes,

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