

A New Approach to Digging

By Merry Campbell

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County

04/20/22

Late March proved to be bittersweet as it foretold the spring to come. Home gardeners loved the warmer weather and its promise of the joys of the budding of trees, shrubs, and flowers blooming. The bitter part of the anticipation of spring comes in the not-so-fun part of preparing your soil for planting. A lot of manual effort is expended through the practice of tilling, or the even more extreme disruption of soil called rototilling. Is there a way to get the garden ready for planting aside from tilling?

Yes, there certainly are other ways to prepare your garden soil, as scientific studies around the world have proven. The approach is referred to as “No-Till Gardening” or alternatively as “No-Dig Gardening”. Is failure to till prior to planting, gardening sacrilege? Not at all, no-till gardening facilitates good soil management. As we have learned in other articles by the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, healthy soil is beneficial to healthy plants. See “Turning Dirt into Soil: The Benefits of Healthy Soil” by Kit Veerkamp [347015.pdf \(ucanr.edu\)](#).

As Kit pointed out in her article, the benefits of healthy soil include:

- High populations of microorganisms.
- Soil in good physical condition holds and provides nutrients, and allows air into plant roots.
- Good soil texture allows it to warm quickly in spring.
- Good texture holds moisture for longer periods of time.
- Well-draining soil does not usually need any added chemical fertilization, which is a critical point to organic gardening.
- Healthy soil discourages pests and diseases.

If all these benefits haven't convinced you to improve your soil by not tilling, let's look at what the no-dig gardening approach also provides:

- Earthworms! No-till gardening promotes the presence of earthworms and other soil dwellers that in turn help the soil flourish.
- Less pests! No-till gardening provides a healthy microbial ecosystem which discourages pests.
- Less water usage! Again, because no-till gardening and heavy mulching go together, less water is needed because the mulch helps to shade the soil which, in turn, means less evaporation.

As illustrated above, the benefits of no-till gardening and the use of organic mulches assist in loosening and improving the soil, especially clay soils, and is environmentally sound in the practice of water conservation and reducing the use of chemical fertilizers.

Mulch is key to no-till gardens. Barb Fick, a horticulturist with the Oregon State University Extension was quoted in an Extension Service publication, on the topic of mulching in no-till gardens and stated, “Whatever you use, don’t skimp on mulch. A heavy layer not only keeps weeds from growing, it also keeps the underlying soil moist, greatly reducing the amount of water you need in summer”.

The mulch you choose will determine the depth that you place on a garden bed. Grass clippings or leaves could be as deep as eight to ten inches. If you use cardboard or newspaper, much less depth is needed but you would also want to add some organic matter on top of cardboard or newspaper. When you’re ready to plant, simply push aside the mulch layer where you want to put your seeds or plants.

Just think of how much more enjoyable our spring gardening will be without having to do the dreaded tilling and endure the resultant aches and pains. Happy gardening!

Master Gardener classes are offered monthly throughout the county. You can find our class schedule at: http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Public_Education_Classes/?calendar=yes&g=56698, and recorded classes on many gardening topics here: http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Public_Education/Classes/.

The Sherwood Demonstration Garden is open weekly on Friday and Saturday from 9 a.m. -noon until March through October. We do close in case of rain, please check our website for details https://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/Demonstration_Garden/

Mark your calendar for our annual ornamentals plant sale on Saturday, April 30, 2022 8:00 AM – 2:00 PM We will have a huge selection of trees, shrubs, grasses, succulents, native and perennial plants. Location: Sherwood Demonstration Garden 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville. <http://ucanr.edu/edcsale>

Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard to answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the “Ask a Master Gardener” option on our website: mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. We’ll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news.