

To Till or Not to Till



When I first started gardening about 26 years ago, my neighbor owned a fantastic rototiller that he pulled behind his Ford tractor. Every spring I'd lay out my garden plot and then be surprised after work with freshly turned soil. It was wonderful and I was spoiled. Then he moved.

The next few years I managed by using a borrowed rototiller, and another neighbor even brought his walk-behind tiller over a few times. He tilled, my husband tilled, my dad tilled, I tilled.... With my 50th year on God's great earth came the realization that I was no longer young. In addition, raking and tilling by hand made my bones and muscles ache for days. Something had to change.

So I explored various methods of gardening used throughout the country. I came across writings of a woman by the name of [Ruth Stout](#). She explained something called Mulching or Layer gardening. After reading about it, I remembered working with an older gentleman in my past who used similar methods. He allowed the city to dump collected leaves all over his garden. I saw his garden once. It was a mess. Do people still use that word to describe an unorganized, disheveled look? Mounds of leaves were piled between the rows; some piled high, some in various stages of decay. I was used to seeing finely cultivated brown earth between manicured rows of vegetables. Frankly, the appearance of a layered vegetable garden is not as pretty as one with the soil turned over and raked fine. Still, I was intrigued. I wanted to find a way to plant a garden without breaking my back.

The premise behind a no-till garden is not the same as you hear about on agricultural farms where the fields are sprayed with herbicides and then planted with no-till Drills after the weeds have died. In layer gardening, you do just what it sounds like. You build up and strengthen the soil with layers of organic matter.

That first year, I laid down newspaper and shredded paper from work, followed by

leaves. My garden has a mixture of clay, loam and gravel on one end and a high concentration of gravelly soil on the other. The gravel end needed work. At the end of the growing season, I was pleased to see more earthworms on the gravel end than previous years. I mowed the bed, spread a 12" layer of leaves evenly over the garden and waited til spring.

It was amazing. The softness of the soil under the leaf mold was as though I were digging in the forest floor. The soil was soft enough to drag a hoe through the pegged rows and plant seeds without all the backbreaking preparation. It was a lot faster too.

Every fall I rake leaves and spread them on the garden. I no longer use shredded paper because I discovered that it takes a long time to break down. And since I grow an organic garden, I realized paper from unknown sources may not be ideal. One year I added a layer of organic mushroom compost. Another year I added a layer of composted horse manure. I had a lot of new weeds come up in the garden that year. Usually, with using just leaves from my yard, there aren't many weeds and those that do come up are easily extracted. The earth is so soft that my weed pulling time has been slashed by more than half.

I will continue to use layer gardening because it is good for the soil, easy on my back and a time saver. I do miss feeling the cool soft earth under my feet and watching the spiders dodging my hoe. The crunchy, dusty leaves also get a little annoying, but the yield from the vegetables has been no different from the tilling method.



At my age, I'm open to change if it makes my life easier.

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