Community

Easy Growing
with the Instant Organic Gardener
No-till gardening

by Don Rosenberg

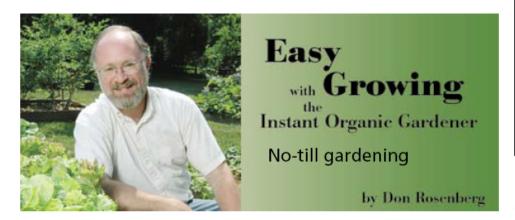At-home vegetable gardening is all the rage this summer. With skyrocketing food and gas prices, people are trying to find ways to save on grocery bills. David Blackley, owner of historic Matthews' Renfrow's Hardware & General store, reports that while sales of grass seed are down, garden-seed sales are through the roof. The problem is many people start a summer garden in the middle of May with good intentions, but weeds are always more vigorous than domestic vegetable plants and the hotter it gets, the faster they seem to grow. And no one wants to be in the backyard on their hands and knees when it's 95 degrees outside!

Skip the tilling

But how do you prevent a garden from turning into a weed patch? First, understand that weeds are nature's way of quickly covering exposed, bare soil that occurs in the event of floods, landslides and the like. The weed seeds can exist in the garden soil for 20 to 50 years, just waiting to see sunlight and sprout. So every time you till your garden, not only do you pulverize the natural layers of your soil, you're also bringing up a fresh batch of weed seeds to torment you all summer.

If you don't have raised beds and weedless soil and instead have an "in-ground garden," I recommend you till only in the first year or two to incorporate organic matter into your soil. (The county has some great compost that can be picked up by the truckload to start turning clay into decent garden soil. It may take several years, but there's nothing better and it's worth the effort. The term is "no-till gardening." Instead of bringing up weeds every time you till, leave the weeds in the dark where they won't sprout.

To ensure weeds never surface, resist the urge to pull out the tiller every season and add organic fertilizer instead.

So how do you keep a garden fertile? A clue is in the forest. Plants seem to grow just fine there, but you never see Smokey the Bear out there with a tiller, do you? The forest has layers of composted leaves, black topsoil and red clay subsoil that form naturally. The worms and bacteria break down the leaves and add all the fertility that's needed.

Fertilize, layer for fewer weeds

This model can be applied to your backyard garden. Each season I recommend using an organic, slow-release fertilizer; Plant-Tone is a good brand. Mix it into the top inch or two of soil. In the summer, add some compost as mulch. This has the benefit of adding more organic matter to the soil; it adds fertility and also helps keep weeds down and conserves moisture. Just like in the forest, your garden will have layers of compost, black topsoil and Carolina clay below. The worms and other life in the soil will take the nutrients throughout your garden and every year the soil will get richer and richer.

What kind of compost is best? There are several available, including worm castings, mushroom compost, cow manure, pine-bark compost and poultry litter, to name a few. You don't need a lot – three inexpensive bags of compost will cover 60 square feet of garden space 1½ inches deep.

Instead of one type, I suggest you try making what I call "super compost." Each type of compost has its own chemical profile with different strengths and weaknesses. Instead of buying three bags of one type, buy one each of three kinds of compost at a local garden center – any variety will do. Mix them together for a better-balanced product.

So resist the urge to pull out the tiller every season to pulverize your soil and bring weed seeds to the surface. Instead, add some organic fertilizer and, in the summer, a layer of blended compost. You'll add fertility to the soil and cut down on weeding, while conserving moisture.

Happy gardening!

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