

CUT YOUR UTILITY BILLS

Plant an Efficient, No-Till Garden

Q: How can I make my garden more efficient?

A: We're glad you asked!

One approach to gardening we are excited about is no-till, also known as no-dig. No-till gardens have been gaining ground with farmers in recent years, partly because of the energy savings. The principles behind no-till gardening work well for large farms, and smaller home gardens. No-till can be done without chemicals.

Research shows this approach can produce more fruits and vegetables within a few years, and they get better over the long term. Best of all, this approach takes less time and effort. You won't even have to fire up the rototiller.

Two ideas are at the heart of no-till gardening. First, don't break up the soil. We usually think that by breaking up the soil and mixing it, we keep weeds from growing. But tilling can bring weed seeds deep in the soil to the top, where they can germinate and grow. Tilling also destroys microbes in the soil that bring nutrients to the plants.

The second idea is to spread thick layers of compost and other mulch on top of the soil. When compost and other mulch are spread on top, they feed the soil from above—the



Cereal rye is one of many cover crops that can be planted in the no-till garden over the winter to help build soil health. PHOTO BY LYNN BETTS

same way leaves in a forest fall to the ground, decompose and turn into rich soil in time. When you build up the soil by spreading layers of compost and other mulch, weed seeds are kept dormant. Mulch keeps the soil moist, so less water is used to irrigate, which means less electricity use for pumping water from your well or community water system.

Your no-till garden can be planted at ground level or in raised beds.

Start by laying weed-blocking material on top of the old dirt. Sheets of cardboard are often used because they will decompose over time. Then spread at least 4 inches of weed-free soil or compost on top.

If the soil under the cardboard is reasonably loose, you can start planting right away. Your garden may be less productive the first year, but it will grow healthier and have fewer weeds every season from then on.

If the ground is heavily compacted or clay, you may have to mix in some compost or healthy soil before laying down the cardboard and give it a year for the new mix to get looser.

In the fall, you can cut the dead plants at ground level and leave the roots in the ground to decompose during winter. You may also want to plant a cover crop such as peas, fava beans or barley late in the growing season.

Setting up a no-till garden takes a fair bit of work, but it requires less maintenance in the future and gets healthier every year.

If you're ready to try your hand at planting a no-till

garden, many colleges and universities offer extension classes for folks who are not enrolled as students. You can also watch a variety of videos online that guide you through setup and long-term care.

Here are a few more tips to reduce energy use related to gardening:

- Drip systems lose less water to evaporation.
- Timers are a convenient way to control irrigation, but be sure to override the timer and shut off watering cycles when a rain shower can do the job.
- Consider buying a rain barrel for energy-efficient watering.
- Learn how to store your produce to reduce waste.
- Make sure your freezer is energy efficient.

We hope these tips will help you prepare for a more energy efficient garden this season.

Happy planting and eating! ■

This column was co-written by Pat Keegan and Brad Thiessen of Collaborative Efficiency. For more energy tips, go to collaborativeefficiency.com/energytips.





Although it takes several years to reap initial benefits, an established asparagus bed is easy to grow and will produce for decades. ADOBE STOCK PHOTO BY NEW AFRICA

Asparagus Rewards Patience

Growing asparagus requires patience—from planting to harvest takes two to three years—but the wait is well worth the reward.

Homegrown asparagus is one of the earliest spring vegetables. Its quality is much better than store-bought spears and is less expensive. Once established, it is easy to grow. In a well-prepared garden patch, it can last for decades.

And asparagus is beautiful. A member of the lily family, its fern-like foliage turns from green to gold in fall and can be a backdrop to chrysanthemums or other late-season flowers.

Barb Fick, horticulturist with the Oregon State University Extension Service, touts the merits of the plant.

“Asparagus is a hardy perennial and should be planted as soon as the soil can be properly prepared in the spring,” Barb says. “Usually, asparagus is started from 1-year-old plants, rather than from seed. The plant you purchase will look like an octopus, with long fleshy roots

extending from the center crown.”

Carefully choose a site to plant asparagus. A good bed of asparagus can remain prolific for many years. It’s important to dig deep to remove weeds and amend the soil with plenty of organic matter. Asparagus will not grow well in heavy, poorly drained soil.

In a trench about 6 inches deep, plant crowns about 12 inches apart. Spread the roots and cover the crowns with 2 inches of rich soil amended with compost or slow-release fertilizer. Add lime if your soil is acidic. As the spears lengthen through the season, fill the trench with soil.

Do not harvest the spears the first spring of planting. They should be left to form ferns, which provide food for the plant. The second spring after planting, a few shoots can be harvested, but only for a week or two. Leave the rest to feed developing roots.

The third spring and thereafter, harvest spears until mid-June, then allow the fern

to grow and keep the root crown healthy.

Asparagus should be fertilized in the spring as spears emerge and again right after the last harvest in June for older plantings.

To harvest, grasp 5- to 8-inch tall spears at the base and bend them toward the ground. The spear will snap where it is free of fiber. Spears may also be cut with a knife, but do not damage the emerging spears. Quality deteriorates rapidly after harvest. If you can’t eat your asparagus immediately, refrigerate or process it. ■

Look for information on how to pickle asparagus in the online OSU publication “Pickling Vegetables,” <https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/pnw355>.



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