

Chemical-free plot clearing

Don't despair if your new allotment looks like a jungle: there is more than one organic method of dealing with it, and a bad back is not inevitable. Conventional advice for clearing an overgrown allotment plot is often to burn off the top growth or spray with the chemical herbicide glyphosate, neither of which is good organic practice. Take a look at the methods below and make a realistic assessment of the time and energy that you are prepared to commit. Then devise a plan of action. You don't have to clear the whole plot immediately, but remember that ground you have cleared won't stay weed-free without your attention. There is nothing more disheartening than putting all your energy into clearing a plot, only to see it revert to weeds a few weeks later because you haven't had time to keep on top of the re-growth.

Where to start

Vegetables vary in their ability to compete with weeds, so the amount of initial weed clearance may depend on the crop to be grown. Before you start, plan what you are going to grow where. Our factsheet GG19 Crop rotation can be very helpful. Try not to be too ambitious. Unless you do a lot of hand clearing in the first year it's best to avoid direct sown crops such as carrots, and those like onions that don't compete well with weeds. If the growth is over 15cm (6in) tall, cut it down with a scythe, sickle or shears – or mow it. Check carefully beforehand for any junk that may be lurking among the weeds. This will immediately make the plot look better. Keep the cuttings – they can be a useful mulch.

Mulching and mulches

Unless you are going to clear the whole plot fairly rapidly, cover it with a light-excluding mulch, such as newspaper, cardboard or black plastic. Weeds can't grow without light, so this will stop them getting any worse and will begin to kill them. Otherwise, keep growth down by mowing or scything regularly.

To get rid of brambles, cut the plants down to the ground, then dig out as much of the roots as you can. Brambles don't like disturbed ground. Long-term mulching will kill most perennial weeds – eventually. Short term mulching will make hand clearing easier. Vigorous vegetables can be planted through a mulch and will produce a crop while the weeds are dying.

Cardboard:

Use opened-out cardboard cartons, with the flaps overlapped to exclude all light from the soil. Large cartons are often available from electrical superstores or hi-fi shops. The cardboard will need to be topped with another mulch to stop it blowing away. You could use the cut growth from the plot, spoiled straw or hay, autumn leaves – your local authority may deliver them free – or green waste compost.

Some people put a layer of manure, compost or grass mowings between the cardboard and the top mulch, but this is not essential. Neglected plots can be very fertile – that's why the weeds are so vigorous. A cardboard mulch should last one growing season. If you see a weed growing through, simply slap on another layer of cardboard.

Black plastic:

If you are going to clear a large area with plastic, it makes sense to invest in a roll of the stuff. 'Silage sheet', available from agricultural merchants, comes in allotment-sized pieces, and may be your cheapest source.

A plastic mulch can be held in place by digging in the edges, or it can be weighed down with another mulch as above. Other alternatives are logs, planks or bricks.

Black plastic keeps air and water from the soil, so the ground is best uncovered after a few months to allow it to breathe. Woven plastic membrane lets air and water through. It is considerably more expensive than black plastic, but is longer lasting.

Growing through a mulch

Sturdy transplants of vigorous vegetables such as courgettes, pumpkins, sweet corn, tomatoes, broccoli, brussels sprouts and kale, can be planted through holes cut in a mulch. Potatoes can be 'planted' on the soil surface, and covered with a thick straw or hay mulch (see our factsheet GG2 No-dig gardening). If you applied a cardboard mulch in winter or spring, when the soil was cold, it will warm up slowly. Crops that like the heat, such as tomatoes and courgettes, grow poorly in cold soil, and are more vulnerable to slug damage. To warm the soil more quickly, cut a hole at least 30cm (12in) square in the cardboard and replace this with black plastic – a bin liner will do – a few weeks before planting.

Digging

Digging or forking over the ground and removing weed roots by hand will immediately clear the way for direct sown crops. It is probably the most strenuous clearing method, however, so don't rush. Mulching the ground for a few weeks before you start will make life easier. If the weed growth is very matted, roughly dig the ground over first with a sharp spade. A long handled 'cultivating hoe' – with the heavy duty blade set at right angles to the handle – is a useful tool for breaking up the ground and much easier on the back than a spade. Leave the rough dug ground for a week or two, then go over it again with a fork, removing all weed roots.

Have a party

A digging party is an excellent organic method of weed clearance. You may be surprised how many people are willing to help in return for congenial company and a good picnic. A working party organised through your Local Exchange Trading System (LETS) might also be an option.

Rotavating

The idea of hiring or buying a powered cultivator can be appealing, especially if you have a large area to clear. It may be the best way to break up the ground quickly, but it can also be hard work. If the plot has been used as a dumping ground, watch out for buried hazards. A disadvantage is that the machine's blades chop up perennial weed roots, and each little bit is likely to re-grow. So, for effective weed clearance, the ground must be cultivated again, or dug over. If you rotavate in spring, wait two or three weeks for the weeds to re-grow, and then cultivate again. Repeat the operation once or twice and even perennial weeds should give up. Another technique is to mulch with cardboard or black plastic after rotavating. This keeps the weeds from re-growing and allows you to slowly peel back the mulch, digging the ground over with a fork, and removing weed roots as you go. Ground that has been rotavated once is easier to dig over.

Keeping it clear

Sow or plant up newly cleared ground as soon as possible, or hoe it regularly as soon as weed seedlings appear. A 'stale seedbed' is a useful technique to use before sowing. Prepare the ground, then leave it for a couple of weeks, or until weed seedlings germinate. Hoe these off, then sow without further disturbing the ground. If ground is likely to be left bare for more than a few weeks it is worth sowing a vigorous crop that will smother weed growth. What you sow will depend on the time of year and how long the land is to be left unused. There are green manures to suit most occasions – see Getting Started Guide GS3 or our step-by-step booklet Green Manures, available from The Organic Gardening Catalogue.

Garden Organic plot clearing plan

Before growing vigorous crops brassicas, squashes, sweetcorn:

- 1) Cut down weed growth.
- 2) Apply a layer of well-rotted manure or compost if necessary.
- 3) Cover with light-excluding mulch.
- 4) Plant through mulch.

Before growing potatoes:

- 1) Dig the ground over roughly.
- 2) Plant potatoes in widely spaced trenches.
- 3) Earth up regularly.
- 4) Or grow No Dig potatoes, under a straw mulch.

Before growing peas and beans:

- 1) Dig ground over and remove all weeds and roots by hand.
- 2) Prepare a stale seedbed.
- 3) Grow tall varieties
- 4) Mulch between rows with newspaper topped with grass mowings

Before growing roots and onions:

- 1) Dig ground over and remove all weeds and roots by hand.
- 2) Prepare a stale seedbed.
- 3) Use a wide row spacing during the first year for easy hoeing.

Additional information

Factsheet GG2 No-dig gardening

Factsheet GG19 Crop rotation

Getting started guide GS3 How to grow green manures

Step by step booklet Green Manures, available from the Organic Gardening Catalogue.

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