

Clearing a neglected plot

The main thing to remember when you take on a neglected plot is ‘Don’t Panic’! It is easy to get overfaced with it when you have just taken on what looks like a bit of jungle or field, but it IS possible. The trick is to take your time, do a small area properly and keep the rest covered up. Once it is cleared, you need to keep it clear. A visit once a week is a minimum, twice is much better. If you leave it alone for a month, it will get swamped again.

First cut down the weeds with a sickle, strimmer or brushcutter. If it’s almost all grass, a strimmer is best. If there are lots of brambles, use a brushcutter and/or loppers.

Now you can see where you are, and you will have found rubbish, stones, holes and bumps etc. You can now do one of several things:

- Rake up the weeds and burn them (only if they are very dry) this gives you the advantage of achieving a lot in one go, and also destroys some weed seeds, but wastes all the valuable organic matter
- Rake up the weeds and compost them. This saves all the organic matter but needs to be done in an organised way if they are to compost successfully. Pile up, squash down a bit and add activator (eg). Add some water if the weeds are very dry. Cover the pile up with black plastic or a piece of carpet, to keep the heat and moisture in.
- Leave them where they are and cover them up. This is the simplest option and saves all the organic matter for future seasons – the weeds will rot down under the cover after a few months, and the woody debris can be removed when you dig.

Next you need to sit back and make some decisions. I would not recommend trying to dig over the whole plot in one go as it is soul destroying as well as backbreaking (unless you have a lot of very good friends!) Choose a place to start (sticking to perhaps 5 square metres), and cover up as much of the rest as possible. Cover with something that will exclude the light – black plastic, carpet*, cardboard or newspaper (whole ones opened out). It is a bit of a pain keeping cardboard or paper in place, but they both rot down and add organic matter. (Try covering the layer of newspapers with a sheet material that wouldn’t normally do the job because it lets light through, eg netting, clear polythene or old curtains. This makes holding down the weed killing layer easier). Weeds need light to survive and within a few weeks they will have turned yellow and started to die off. ‘Orrible weeds (the ones with nasty roots – you’ll find out all about them) will not be killed quickly, some take as much as two years to die completely, but even a few months will weaken them and make them much easier to dig out. Be methodical about this, don’t leave gaps between sheets of material, because weed roots can travel quite a distance. If you can’t gather enough materials to cover the plot, don’t worry about it. You’ll just have to cut the weeds down again when they grow back, that’s all!

If while you are doing all this you have access to bulky organic materials (eg farmyard manure, or leaves), spread them around in a thick (5-10cm) layer underneath the weed suppressing covers. When you come to taking up the covers and dealing with the soil you will find that a good proportion of the stuff has already been taken down by the worms.

OK, so you’ve covered up some of your plot, and you’ve decided where you’re going to start. Now you can start breaking some ground.

* Some allotment associations will have rules against carpet. If you are allowed to use it, natural wool carpets with a jute back are best, but they are very rare. (Most hessian backed carpet is in fact about 25% nylon, ie plastic, which doesn’t rot down, and winds itself infuriatingly round your fork 3 years later). The best alternative is that almost indestructible cheap cord carpet, the stuff that is quite stiff and board like. It lasts for donkeys years without breaking down, and stays light and easy to move about. I wouldn’t recommend foam backed, you really don’t want it in the soil.

Digging and forking

The first thing to remember is to take digging/forking very easy indeed. Only do it for 20 minutes or so at a time to begin with. When the soil is in good shape, nice and crumbly, it is quite possible to dig or fork for ages without getting backache, but neglected ground is not nice and crumbly. The chances are it will be hard, compacted and a solid mat of weed roots (except where it has been covered for a while - you will immediately notice the difference).

Use a spade to chop out chunks of soil (it's not a competition, only lift what you feel comfortable with), then break them up with the fork. Alternatively, just use the fork, but again, just go for small portions. Concentrate on a small area at a time, because you need to take out ALL the weed roots. The roots of nasty weeds (Couch grass, bindweed, marestail, thistle, dock, and dandelion) will re-grow from a tiny section left in the ground. Don't worry if you don't know what these weeds look like, at this stage, just take all the roots out. You will soon recognise the more civilised weeds from the horrors.

Being methodical is important, you'll miss plenty of little bits, but you can always do it again, and I promise it will be easier the next time!

If the soil is wet enough to stick to your boots, leave it to dry out, as digging wet soil can spoil the structure. Drier soil is much, much easier to fork over anyway.

What to do with the roots? The problem is, if you try to compost these roots, they will just grow again. There are several options:

- Dry them out till they are brittle then compost or burn them (fine in the south of France!)
- Take them home and put them in the dustbin or take them to the tip (wasteful)
- Pack them into black plastic bags and wait for them to rot down – they will produce good organic matter eventually. This process can be speeded up by the addition of doses of compost activators (manure, blood meal, chopped up nettles, seaweed or QR – a herbal additive you can buy from the organic gardening catalogue)
- Pile them into a heap on top of a board of some kind and cover them up to exclude the light, which does the same as the above (the board stops weeds from underneath growing up into the heap)

You could try using the bags or heaps to grow greedy plants like courgettes on. Cut a slit in the top and plant a courgette plant. The heat absorbed by the plastic together with the nutrients being released by the decomposing weed roots gives the plant a flying start. (I've not tried this yet, but I've seen it done and was very impressed)

The thing is, there will be an awful **lot** of roots to dispose of. If you're going to make heaps or bags, think about where to put them, so you don't have to move them. Avoid just heaping the roots up in a pile, because it will invariably get left there and the roots will re-grow. Before you know it you'll have a weedy mound instead of a mound of weeds.

Don't worry at this stage about double digging, or adding organic matter, you can do that sort of thing when you have got this bit sorted out. Once you've got a patch reasonably weed free it's decision time again. You can either work on the next patch, or concentrate on this one and leave the rest covered up.

I think that if I was starting another derelict plot I would probably aim to prepare 3 small plots, each of about 5 square metres (ie 3 beds – see next section). Having dug and forked one, you might have had enough for the time being, and want to do something else!