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CORONA-YOUR-OWN

Helping you to get organic growing despite the disruption
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Welcome

Charles Dowding is Katie's no-dig gardening guru, as Andrew Cuomo (NYS governor) is my coronavirus guru. Harebells in front gravel garden – British native, self seeded (from original plants grown from seed). Flowers from late spring to late autumn, great cut flowers, though the stems are slender and easily bent.



The evolution of a no-dig garden

Susie Hammett interviews Katie Husbands

I have always been fascinated by gardening styles and often wonder how a particular style has evolved for its gardener. HEOG, our Heart of England Organic Group, have visited many private gardens, allotments and smallholdings over the past decades as part of its outdoor summer programme. Hosts have generously shared their stories alongside allowing us to visit their plots. The most striking observation is that absolutely no two gardens are the same, just as no two folk are the same!

We have been fortunate to share John Sargent's garden, benefiting from his experience and knowledge gleaned over a century of his life's observations and practices. At the other end of the garden path we have also visited Katie's town garden in Kenilworth, a terraced house back garden that is providing food and flowers for a family of four.

When Katie and John were house hunting six years ago their priority was not only to find the right house for their needs but, equally, the right garden. The west facing plot they chose, previously designed as separate areas falling away from the house, proved to be ideal. Although well structured, the soil condition of the garden was impoverished due to years of neglect – a 'problem' that Katie embraced with open arms and cunning ways to add the necessary organic matter to create a vibrant growing medium.

"The raised beds in our garden were in poor condition and the soil was depleted, malnourished and full of creeping buttercup. The garden's orientation was favourable with its long side facing south giving us sun all day and into the evening. A big factor in the choice of where we were to live was that I planned to grow vegetables and wished to do this in a garden where I could take the opportunity to 'pop out' when time allowed-----"

Growing up on my parents' smallholding, with its vegetable gardens, goats and hens, meant that I had been born into a food growing ethos that seemed to be in my blood – it just seemed natural to be doing the same when I left home. I soon discovered that fresh food from supermarkets often didn't last long after purchase and tasted far inferior to food of my childhood. Foods that my family and I loved like asparagus and mange tout peas were expensive to buy. Growing our own meant that I had the choice of when to harvest for the right sized vegetable for my family – we like small broad beans!"



Year 1: Summer – raised beds impoverished / riddled with creeping buttercup

Began trench method of soil improvement: weeding, digging out existing soil in a strip and lining trench bottom with animal manure topped by weeded original soil. This was laboriously repeated throughout the garden's six raised beds. Discovered blueberry bushes and raspberry canes in ground next to raised beds. Began to top dress these with any mulching material available.

Year 2: Repeatedly weeding, mulching, weeding and feeding the green waste bins with creeping buttercups

Began raising seed in the greenhouse and planting into raised beds. Still a work in progress.

Year 3: Soil structure rapidly improving

Continuous feeding of the soil with mulches and from our own compost heap begun in year 1. Raised bed wood showing signs of deterioration. Began to experiment with the no-dig method of growing under the excellent tuition of Charles Dowding through his YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCB1J6siDdmhwah7q0O2WJBG>

Year 4: Began no-dig in earnest

Bought Charles Dowding's excellent Year planner. Replaced raised beds with new timbers.

Year 5: The no dig method of growing gathered speed

"I liked the way Charles Dowding de-mystified the concept of no-dig and made it accessible for me, encouraging me to give it a try. I soon found that, once begun, I just couldn't go wrong with this method and the benefits soon became apparent including fewer weeds and less work weeding! This was my first year of no-dig potatoes where I planted the seed potatoes deeply into the 4 - 6 inch layer of compost which was covering well-rotted animal manure. The results were amazing: lots of clean potatoes easily lifted out with my hands."

Year 6: Current year of gardening here and the third year of adopting no-dig

"The garden's fertility has improved hugely. To plant I literally push my fingers into the soil and pull gently to the side to create a planting hole. The plant is then dropped into the hole and firmed in. This method makes it so easy to plant successional throughout the year and, of course, to harvest crops. I am continually making compost from my own resources in my garden and also import animal manure from my parents' organic holding. I do take great care with what I compost, considering the possibility of hidden chemicals that I wish to avoid. Autumn is the time when I top dress all of the beds with compost, although compost is added throughout the year as required."

"The only disadvantages I have discovered with the no-dig method of gardening is from neighbours cats who love the easy digging (garlic granules are a good repellent) and birds finding the easy pulling from the soil of my young plants irresistible."

"I love weeding now – it's so easy and satisfying and my children love our garden and are growing up with a sound understanding of where our food comes from. They like trying new foods and this year are obsessed with mange tout – so much so that we have had very few make it back up the long garden path and into the kitchen!"

Woody root crops

John Sargent, HEOG's centenarian life President, has been giving Ann's question about woody root crops some consideration and asked Diana to pass on the following recommendations. He thinks it could be a problem with soil quality, possibly even a remains of industrial waste and considers that the soil ph must be very low eg 4 and doubts whether there are any worms. He thinks it could be a mineral deficiency and suggests building up the ph with dolomite lime or Epsom salts (you can buy them from Boots). A shortage of copper with be helped by chickweed which is rich in it. Also an idea to sow phacelia and red clover and dig it in.

from Diana

For my part, I find that carrots certainly need a rich soil not freshly manured but manured for a previous crop and I usually sow carrots after brassicas which have had lime added to the soil so that might be a factor. Certainly I find that when I have taken over a new allotment the carrots initially are rubbish but gradually improve over time with organic cultivation. My best carrots were probably in ground that had been a field previously and left fallow but with a wealth of plants eg clovers etc in the pasture.

I've included a photo of my comedy carrots from the allotment – no manure in the ground – maybe they went in a sideways search for water? Looks aren't everything – they were very tasty. GMcG



Freebies from Pam

I have the following to give away. The angelica plant pictured. In a pot, ready to go in the ground – it will reach the stated size next year. It needs plenty of space, both for top growth and root-run. It's too big for my garden, hence the give-away!

For any beginning gardener, I also have endless small and medium sized pots, and plug/seedling trays – happy to give them to anyone who needs them. Collection from Kenilworth. Contact Pam direct - pamlunn@gn.apc.org



COOK-YOUR-OWN

If you have any favourite seasonal recipes, send them in and we will add them to the Resources page on the website, with a reference in the newsletter. enews@heog.org.uk

POSTSCRIPT

Feedback from our readers is important, so if you have ideas, news or tips you would like to share, please let us know.

If you have any questions related to organic growing which you think our members might be able to answer, let us know and we will try to include the questions and replies in our newsletters.

You can contact us at enews@heog.org.uk .

Gillian McGivern