

The Joy of No Dig

Interview with Charles Dowding

RICHARD SWANN

Compost for the year just spread under Brigitte Brussels October.



Charles Dowding, by Edward Dowding.

Richard:

How did you first find your way into no-dig organic gardening?

Charles:

I got interested through nutrition at university and became a vegetarian. I read a book about animal rights, which made me think more about what I was eating. By age 20, I became more interested in organic food. In the '80s, organic was quite narrowly defined as just the absence of synthetic chemicals, which also led me to an interest in biodynamics.

Through old Soil Association magazines, I came across the idea of "not digging" - that's what they called it back then. I actually coined the term "no dig" around 2015. I noticed a lot of organic growers in the early '80s were struggling with weeds. I thought, "I can't live

Charles is very well known to many organic and biodynamic gardeners both in the UK and across the world for his no dig approach to gardening. He also has an interest in biodynamics. I had the great pleasure of chatting with him earlier in the year.

with this, it's not viable or practical." So I began exploring ways to reduce weed growth, which led me to mulching. That naturally made sense with no dig: leave the soil alone and let nature look after itself.

Over the years, I found that no dig results in far fewer weeds and saves time - something most of us are short on. How it links to biodynamics is interesting. I think many organic growers are missing out on that next step - whether it's biodynamics or something else. We can get more quality into our food, especially if it's homegrown. I feel no dig really helps with that. You're encouraging healthier microbes, and we're now learning how important soil microbes are for us. Our gut is like a quarter of the brain, so it's a no-brainer! Who wouldn't want a more active, alert brain and better awareness? I feel I have that from eating so much homegrown food - about 80% of my diet comes from here. I'm 66 now and still feeling good, and I hope that I can inspire others. If you can grow even a little of your own food, it's such a gateway to good health.

Richard:

Who is your inspiration for gardening?

Charles:

The early writings from the Soil Association in the '70s and '80s were really good - they talked a lot about compost. People like Maye Bruce, who made great compost in the Cotswolds, and then Albert Howard, Eve Balfour, and Ruth Stout. Ruth developed the mulching-at-home method, which I later realized can attract a lot of slugs, but she was still excellent on the principle of no dig.

Richard:

Your garden, Homeacres is in Somerset. How big is it?

Charles:

The total area is about 1.6 acres, of which I crop about half an acre. That's because I run it as a market garden. Last year, I sold around £35,000 worth of produce from that space. I use double cropping, interplanting, intersowing, and close spacing - all of which make that possible.



Charles rakes the drills after sowing carrots after clearing peas.

There's also quite a bit of grass to keep tidy, and hedge prunings provide materials for making compost. I make about two-thirds of the compost I need and buy in the remaining third.

The garden is the basis for my writing and videos. I value it most for that - and for my own health of course. The sales I make are relatively small in terms of income. I earn enough to pay the wage of one full-time team member, which is great.

Richard:

How many years have you been there? How has your soil developed over the years since 1983?

Charles:

I grew up on a farm, and I was used to going out into a field with a rotavator to make the soil loose and fluffy before sowing. So when I started no dig, it felt radical even to me. I wondered, "Is this really going to work?" I think that's a common feeling for anyone who's used to digging.

Year one in 1983 was a great success. But people would say things like, "Oh, there was a four-year trial by HDRA in the '60s that proved no dig starts to fail after four years." I feel that's misinformation. That trial may not have been set up in a fair or balanced way.

Now, I've just completed my 12th year at Homeacres, and I've seen no drop-off in performance - quite the opposite. I think that has a lot to do with how much compost I use.

There's always a big debate in the gardening world about how much compost you really need. I tend to use about an inch a year on all beds to maintain fertility. That keeps the nutrient level high, but I've also been experimenting to understand how little input I can get away with while still getting good output. It really depends on your goals.

Because I'm market gardening and need a high return per square metre, I apply more compost than someone growing casually. That intensity makes the difference.

Richard:

Do you use cover crops?

Charles:

Not much. I've trialled them over the years, but I prefer to keep my beds full of productive plants from about April to November - the main growing season. I'm not too bothered about filling beds in winter because not much grows then.

Whether or not you have living roots in the soil in December, January, or February doesn't matter so much, as long as the soil is covered. In my case, I use compost mulch, which I find results in fewer slugs come spring.

That's something I've been focusing on - reducing pest populations

naturally. I'd rather prevent slugs than reach for a remedy to kill them. That's the chemical way of thinking, which I try to avoid.

Richard:

Have you measured the soil or done any soil tests?

Charles:

Very little. I don't really believe in soil tests. I feel they come from a chemical mindset I've moved away from. For me, the best soil test is how well the plants grow.

Richard:

One of the challenges people have with no dig is sourcing cardboard and compost. A lot of cardboard can be hard to come by, and most people don't have a lot of compost.

Charles:

Right, but if you're not using compost, what are you using? And what's your output of vegetables per square metre? How much weeding do you have to do?

I'd flip it and say: one inch of compost per year equates to about 40 tonnes per acre - which is similar to what traditional market gardens and allotments used to apply, back when animal manure was plentiful.

That amount enables high yields without too much effort. So, are we more short of compost or short of time? There's also nothing wrong with buying a bit of compost if you need it.

Also, ask yourself if you really need a full-size allotment - say, 260 square metres. I can grow 50 kilos of vegetables a year from one-tenth of that. So if space or compost is limited, maybe dedicate half the plot to wildflowers and focus your resources on the other half.



Compost heap: 1st December - mid-March 15 weeks.



Trial beds April 2025, no dig bed is nearest.

Richard:
Do you use animal manure?

Charles:
I'm happy to, but I'm cautious with horse manure due to the risk of pyralid herbicide contamination. That said, I haven't heard much about it lately, so maybe it's less of a concern now. I wouldn't want to put people off using a potentially free and valuable resource.

Richard:
Another big question - slugs!
Many people complain about getting so many of them!

Charles:
It's likely the compost is attracting them. If it's too fresh, with wet, claggy lumps, that gives slugs places to hide. On allotments, you can't always control the habitat around your plot, which makes it tougher.

In my trials, where I compare dug beds with no dig, I actually get more slug damage in the beds where I dig and incorporate compost, as opposed to just laying it on top.

Richard:
What do you think of wood chippings - do you use them?

Charles:
I do, but not in large amounts. I question the sustainability of using lots of woodchips, especially as there's high demand for biomass fuel. I use a little around the garden to encourage fungal mycelium.

My compost already contains a fair bit of woody material, which decays slowly and supports fungal life. It's not fully decomposed, but it's stable - no slug-hiding lumps. And the mycelium grows beautifully in that.

Richard:
What's your preferred method for composting? I'm using a 'dalek'.

Charles:
I agree - they're excellent. I've got two 'daleks' going at any time, and I find the compost from them superb - as long as you add enough fibrous material. Woody bits chopped small are great; they keep the structure airy while the heap matures.

I also use pallet bins. Pallets are great - they're free, and you just need



June harvests at solstice, the last peas and broad beans, already there are no more turnips, spinach or radish.

a couple of wires to hold them in place. I fill one end first, then the other, and when it's time, I turn them into the middle bay. That way, I end up with a tonne of really nice compost. I always keep the heaps covered, usually with corrugated sheets, to help the process finish properly.

Richard:
Do you follow any biodynamic practices?

Charles:
I am very intrigued by how it's developed over the years. I noticed that when Rudolf Steiner gave those lectures, you know it wasn't a farming blueprint, was it? It was more of a spiritual understanding behind a different approach if you like. If it's presented in too precise a way it can put me off. But the one technique I like particularly is preparation 500. It makes a lot of sense to me and the vortex is such a powerful creative shape and force. And so, I do that twice a year and I feel that makes a difference here, but I can't prove it. I really feel it.

I've also got Maria Thun's, calendar and I produce my own one as well and I like to compare the two. I am keen on planting by the phases of the moon, but I'm more I'm actually more keen on the waxing and waning phase. And so I think there's many ways of looking at the moon as well, but I do appreciate the Thuns work on that.

Richard:
You have over 10 books including the very popular one called No Dig. You are also put out a lot of very informative videos on YouTube and social media.

Charles:
Yes that work probably takes two days a week of my time, but I don't regret that at all because

social media has enabled me to breakthrough the glass ceiling, which I feel is or until recently has been maintained by mainstream media over a lot of new ideas that people will benefit from.

With social media, you've got instant access to your audience. For example, there's one guy on Instagram, he calls himself the nodigkid. He started when he was eight and he just got the material he needed and the means from my Instagram page. He is very successful and putting up content regularly.

Richard:
What advice would you give to someone just starting out with no dig?

Charles:
Start small and make it really effective and high yielding. Plant close, interplant and multi plant to crop intensively. Lay down cardboard if there are many weeds, add compost on top, and start planting. See how it goes. You don't need to do your whole plot at once.

For further information about Charles' work see:

Web: www.charlesdowding.co.uk/

Instagram: [@charles_dowding](https://www.instagram.com/charles_dowding)

Youtube: [@CharlesDowding1nodig](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCCharlesDowding1nodig)



Homeacres 7th September 2024 view from East.