

NO DIG VEGETABLE AND FRUIT COMMUNAL GROWING

In 2010 a small group of gardeners in the small village of Strathkinness in Fife started a Community Garden on two acres of land. Over the years it developed into an 80 tree orchard (1), habitat area, 30 small allotment plots, primary school and nursery gardens, polytunnel, soft fruit cage, shared glasshouses, shrub borders, herbaceous borders and habitat planting all tended by approximately sixty volunteers of all ages. Five young people have used the garden as a project for their Duke of Edinburgh Award.

However during the pandemic the demand for allotments became great with 15 new families, most of whom had little experience of growing, applying for growing space. We decided to start a communal project on an additional 300 square metres of rough field. The group established that the project should be productive, low maintenance, organic, climate friendly, and contain a wide variety of produce throughout the year with tree fruit varieties different from those in the established orchard. Therefore three years ago we started this, our first no dig garden.



Photo 1 The garden in year 1

One requirement for no dig is to obtain plenty of compost. Although we have 12 large compost heaps in the garden we had to import the majority of the 30 tonne in but was fortunate in having readily available PAS 100 material of excellent quality from both Dundee and Fife Councils. This material has a pH of 7.2 sufficient to ensure the availability of the good levels of N P K and trace elements. We also tested the compost for herbicide residues (negative bean test). The local supermarket provided several van loads of cardboard which was placed over the growing area and wetted. The compost was spread to an approximate depth of 100 mm. and the same day early potatoes were planted followed by

many other vegetable plants raised in trays as well as seeds sown directly in the compost. Photo 1 shows the vegetable bed in mid June after starting the garden in early April. The only perennial weed to burst through the cardboard/compost layer was rosebay willowherb. This was dealt with by pulling and eventually the root system weakened and it died out. In subsequent years we add just 20mm of our own compost.

The fruit part of the garden was planted in the first two winters and comprises fruit that doesn't require netting such as Autumn raspberries, blackcurrants, gooseberries, lingonberries, honey berry, boysenberry, Tay berry, jostaberry and brambles. The tree fruit included cider apples, medlar, gage, damson, mulberry and quince.

We have measured the carbon content at different positions at a depth of 250mm with a very respectable 5% carbon using the Hutton Institute photographic app available only in Scotland unfortunately.

Select photo

Back

Take a new photo or switch the setting to "Off" to choose one from

Camera Use existing photo

Choose/
take photo

Complete.

Result
OM 8.5%, C 4.9%

OK



Result: OM 8.5%, C 4.9% at lat: 56.3337, lo...

Photo 2 Soil organic matter and carbon measurement using the Hutton Institute app

We have a small plant propagation team who are presently evaluating a range of peat free seed and potting composts including a home made seed compost that has performed very well so far.

I first started growing organic fruit and vegetables on an allotment in Northampton fifty years ago but have to admit that this project has made me rethink my ideas in the following ways for growing vegetables:

- We didn't use any crop rotation and just kept replanting an area once it had been harvested producing two or three crops in any given year I.e. kept the beds with plant cover as much as is possible. Even brassicas have been grown in the same location which has made netting against pigeons easier. We will monitor this carefully looking out for plant diseases such as club root.
- It's a great way to get beginners motivated and learning as results happen so quickly, weeds are minimal, walking on the beds appears to make no difference.
- We keep the beds in an undisturbed state. Root vegetables are carefully eased out the ground with a light recovering of compost when necessary. When a plant has finished cropping e.g. a brassica it is not dug out but cut out at ground level so maintaining the soil biology and helping to sequester stable carbon.

In conclusion this project has been very successful in getting absolute beginners growing and sharing organic food in a communal setting with minimal effort producing large quantities of high quality vegetables with fruit hopefully following later this year. It's also great fun to garden this way with others.

Robert Bilson retired member

- (1) A tale of four orchards, Robert Bilson PPG magazine July 2021.

No Dig Organic Fruit and Vegetable Garden March 2024

