

“ORGANIC GARDENING, THE NATURAL NO-DIG WAY”

By Charles Dowding

This is a blockbuster of a book. It should be recognised as one of the all-time-great gardening books. The author has been carrying out no-dig gardening on a commercial scale for 25 years, selling salads and vegetables locally to restaurants and shops in Somerset from his nearly one acre of land. He tells us how it is done, giving away his trade secrets, and I found it fascinating. He has gardened in France and I was extremely interested in his book since I have lived in France for several years, practised no-dig gardening since the year 2000 and have grown just about all of the vegetables and fruit he covered. So I delighted in obtaining his ideas.

The book will be of obvious attraction to everyone interested in true organic gardening (using absolutely no insecticides, herbicides or artificial fertilisers). Those practising no-dig gardening will find the book fascinating. Those who know little about no-dig gardening will find the general principles and methodology explained clearly. Those who are just interested in finding out how to grow particular vegetables and fruit will find a mine of information. The author has been generous in providing 224 pages of text having a smallish type size – so there is a lot to read. In addition to the 224 pages of text there are 32 pages of simply delightful colour photographs of vegetables and fruit growing in the author’s plot. The sheer scale of his operation is amazing, with massive rows of vegetables of every kind. The book will also be of great interest to his competitors; Charles has given away his trade secrets, knowledge he has acquired over a lifetime of commercial growing.

When I started growing my own vegetables and fruit my first book was that great classic by Dr W E Shewell-Cooper “The Complete Gardener” (he was also the founder of The Good Gardeners’ Association). That book became my “bible”. Over the years I acquired a great number of gardening books but none were a patch on Shewell-Cooper’s masterpiece. Now, in Charles Dowding’s book, we have a book in the same league as the masterpiece. In a way it is better, in that it was published in 2007, not 1950 and more knowledge has since been obtained about the way plants grow, their environment, the vital importance of the constituents of soil – and not least the new varieties of vegetables and fruit now available to the modern gardener.

The book has two sections. The first section of 41 pages is on the principles and methods of organic gardening the no-dig way. The second section of 164 pages is on individual vegetables and fruit, how to grow them, their seasons, varieties to grow, their problems, harvesting and storing. There is a foreword by Patrick Holden, the director of the Soil Association. There is a most useful list at the end of the book of organisations and suppliers, complete with addresses. Lastly there is a good index.

Now, what is the magic this book has which others don’t have? The clue lies in the following sentence from the author “I never trained in a horticultural college, and am utterly grateful not to have done so, because it kept my mind clear of preconceptions”. Here is a gardener who has found out for himself how to grow things, by trial and error over a lifetime. He grows tremendous crops which find great favour in his local area and has found ways of growing vegetables and fruit completely organically – and economically - such that he can compete with the big boys who practise chemical farming. Here, in this paperback volume, is distilled all that knowledge, knowledge which comes from personal experience rather than just repeating what earlier authors have said. The book is easy to read. There are virtually no spelling, punctuation or grammatical errors. The standard of proof-reading is amazingly high. Someone took great care indeed.

For those new to the ideas of no-dig gardening, one simply spreads a 2-3 inch layer of compost or well-rotted manure on the soil and grows crops in it. The worms do the digging by rising to the surface to digest the compost, so creating vertical channels in the soil for oxygen from the air to

penetrate for the benefit of soil micro-organisms. The soil is therefore undisturbed by digging or ploughing and the myriad species of life in the soil can do their work of providing a fantastic growing medium for the crops. In particular, mycorrhizal fungi can play their part in providing plant roots with the nutrients the plant – and ourselves – require. Mycorrhizal fungi are killed by digging or ploughing and by artificial chemicals, so that is why organic no-dig gardeners avoid such destructive methods of growing crops.

The author also gives, throughout the book, recipes for cooking most of the vegetables. I detect a French flavour here! They sound delicious. It is a nice touch. After all, the whole objective is to eat what one grows and it is important to prepare the produce in the best possible way. There is, however, no coverage on freezing – but there is ample coverage on storing crops in traditional ways. He grows crops for sale all the year round and is a master at immediately following on one crop with another. He devotes much space to the number one enemy – the slug – and despite the complete non-use of chemicals manages to keep slug damage to the minimum. He has big problems with cabbage white butterflies. My solution is to keep a 3/8 inch mesh net permanently over brassicas and that serves to keep pigeons off as well. He sows most crops in small pots in the greenhouse and plants them out (after re-potting where necessary) when they are big enough to survive slug attack. Germinating seeds are completely at the mercy of slugs and snails so his method is cost-effective in the end. There is a most useful table on how long packets of seed keep.

So there you have it. A marvellous book that is a delight to read and a mine of information. Definitely a “best buy”. It was published as a paperback by Green Books Ltd in 2007 and costs £10.95. ISBN 978-1-903998-91-5. A suitable Christmas present for anyone who grows their own.

MIKE MASON