

Todd Dwyer's "Quick Start, No-Till, Weed-Free Garden" Guide

- None of this can be attributed to me. I am only presenting the brilliant techniques that have long been used by those far more clever than I. My methods may vary, but the principles remain tried and true.
 - I will use a 32'x50' rectangle (referred to as a "block") for my example below.
 - Tools and materials needed: min. 100' tape measure, heavy hammer/hand sledge, 38 2"x2"x16" wooden stakes, mason's line, 32'x50' polyethylene silage tarp (black side up- DO NOT use any other kind of tarp), a LOT of weights to keep the tarp down (smooth rocks, concrete pavers, sand bags, large rounds of wood, etc), 2x6 lumber, saw, and fasteners.
1. Mark the corners of your garden block with 2"x2"x16" stakes pounded into the ground with approximately 6" remaining above ground. You will need at least a 100' tape measure and a heavy hammer for this this work.
 2. Make sure the rectangle is equal (square). Do this by pulling a diagonal and make sure the measurements are identical. Recall your Pythagoras- $a^2+b^2=c^2$. For example, a 32'x50' rectangle will have a diagonal measurement of 59.36'
 3. Lay out each of your garden beds within the block. I use a 30" wide bed, at 48' long. There is a 1' space (well, 9" on the side but I will widen it a bit) around the entire garden block to allow for a wheel hoe to keep encroaching weeds and grass at bay. From center-to-center of each bed is 48", with an 18" path between each 30" bed. I use a marked 2"x2"x8' as a template for laying out beds/paths. You can use a tape measure as well.
 4. Use the same stake size for the bed corners as you did for the block, 2"x2"x16". Leave 2" above ground. Any taller and you will trip on them, tear your tarp, hit with a mower, etc. They need to be high enough to allow you to tie mason's line to them for designating the edges of the beds.

5. All of your dimensions are now marked. Now make sure all stakes are buried to depth, with no more than 2" above ground.
6. Mow the entire block as short as the exposed stakes will allow (if you left them sticking out too far, the mower will let you know). Water thoroughly. I soak the entire space for at least 6 hours. Your location and soil will dictate how long you should water. The tarp will be in place for 1 year (no less), so no water will get to that space. Act accordingly.
7. If you have the resources available, adding organic matter (particularly manure) at this point is very helpful. Only add this precious material to the beds, not the paths. Do not use bulky material that will lift the tarp.
8. Spread the tarp, black side up, and secure with your weights. Weight the corners first to align the tarp, then the edges. Keep the tarp as high as you can, but don't get carried away. Once the edges are all weighted, place weights along the paths. "How many weights do I need?" Answer: always more than you expect. You can not have too much, but you certainly can have too few. A loose tarp is not doing it's job, and it's incredibly frustrating. I place weights no more than 3-4' apart in any direction, closer on the edges that catch prevailing winds.
9. Voila! Now wait no less than 365 days. Seriously. Do not think less time will work- it won't, and all of your time will be wasted. Patience, grasshopper.
10. After 365 days, uncover, broad fork all of the beds, amend appropriately, and pull all perennial weeds with roots systems intact. Cultivate weekly. More on all this below.
11. Congratulations- you now have your very own no-till garden space. Get to growing.
12. SUPER TOP SECRET SHORT-CUT TO GROW NOW:
 1. Follow all of the above steps, but leave a 1-4 rows uncovered. Only leave the minimum amount of beds uncovered.
 2. Build low raised beds with 2x6s (stacked 2-3 high on edge = 11" (2) or 16 1/2" (3) high) 8' long, with a 2' wide gap between beds on end. Rip 2x6 in half (now 2 3/4" wide) for stakes to secure bed. At least 12" of the support take should be in the ground.
 3. Lay plain, uncolored cardboard, or unbleached Kraft paper, or Kraft paper feed bags on the bottom of the wooden frame for your raised beds. You are making a

sheet mulch (see the Internet for more information). This will minimize weed pressure while simultaneously beginning to decompose the weeds that are now covered.

4. Fill your raised beds with the same soil/amendments/compost that you will be using on the mature garden.
5. Cover the pathways with unbleached cardboard, Kraft paper, or weed barrier to keep the unwanted plants down.
6. Plant into your temporary raised beds. Have your successes, failures, and delicious meals from these small beginnings.
7. At the end of the growing season, pull the wooden beds apart, rake the soil along the length of your beds, and now pull the tarp over this area. Now your whole block is tarped.
8. If you tarp in the Spring (this is best), you will pull the tarp back at the beginning the next growing season to reveal the portion that has been covered for 365 days. No cheating. Hop on your broad fork, and get to work. A soil test will tell you what your soil needs specifically, but you'll never go wrong adding organic compost.
9. Weed pressure is greatly reduced, but not over. Nature abhors a vacuum, and perennial weeds are persistent. You will need to pull the perennials out with their roots. A cobra head weeder is fantastic for this tough work, as are quality knee pads or a cushion to make crawling around on you hands and knees less miserable.
10. Cultivate the soil regularly (the top 1" - 1 1/2") Thread-stage weeds are easy to return to the undifferentiated Tao, mature plants less so. Never let weeds flower and seed. Never ever.
11. At the end of the growing season, put the tarp back over the entire garden. At this point, you will have grown on each bed, and each bed will have been covered for at least 365 contiguous days. Leave the tarp on for the off-season.
12. Spring (Year 3) has arrived. Uncover the entire garden, broad fork all of the beds, amend all the beds. Now the entire block is on the same time and fertility program.
13. Wipe the sweat from your virtuous brow and start growing. Well done.