

An observation and new experiment by John Deeprise
(Originally for Humber Avenue but with wider application)

This is not intended to teach anyone how to suck eggs and I am not claiming to be an authority on anything. I felt that my experience of trying to improve my soil's fertility was worth sharing.

Grass, Wood chips and Horse manure.

Our plots lack the natural cycle of growth and decay that uncultivated soil would experience. The natural cycle provides the soil with the organic matter it needs to be fertile in a way that enables plants to take up the necessary nutrients for healthy growth. By continually removing weeds and crops from our plots we reduce the level of organic matter in our soils. Eventually a level is reached that plants fail to grow properly, and weeds become more prevalent.

This link goes into more detail.

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=865>

For some years I relied upon fertilisers to try and grow my plants such as Growmore, blood fish and bone, sulphate of ammonia etc. I would get some soil conditioner from a local company and spread it around as much as possible. It proved to be expensive but the soil conditioner did make my soil more friable and easier to dig. But I needed more of it.

We are now lucky to be able to have large quantities of organic matter delivered free to our allotment site.

GreenserveGM are now delivering their grass mowings and in the Autumn we should get lots of fallen leaves.(The grass has not been treated with any chemicals).

Urban Surgeons deliver us wood chips as we need them.

Horse manure is delivered from stables in Patching apparently.

Note: Horse manure is 100% grass / hay that has passed through a horse's digestive system. It's no more than that.

All of these delivered materials can be used to make compost, which, when well rotted, can be dug into the ground or used as a mulch. Approximately a 2:1 mix of green material and woody material is about the right mix. Be aware that, as already said, horse manure is just grass so is considered to be green. Any carbon rich material can be used as the brown element. So straw, hay, cardboard, paper as well as the autumn leaves is all good. I have previously collected lots of leaves from the streets. No one complains about that it seems.

As a raw material, grass, leaves and wood chips can be used to mulch around our plants where it can decay and be pulled into the soil by worms, centipedes, woodlice etc. (Nature's natural way).

Mulching reduces the need for constant weeding as the mulch will block most of the light needed to encourage the weeds to grow. As you hoe and dig bare earth you bring more weed seeds to the surface and the cycle repeats. Mulching breaks this cycle. It also helps to prevent moisture loss reducing the need for so much watering and the worms etc will breakdown the mulch and mix it into your soil as it decays. Any weeds that do pop through are easily removed with minimal effort. It seems that approx 1 to 2 inches deep is sufficient depth as a mulch.

As an experiment this year I am trying the no dig method of cultivation. My paths are all wood chips and my soil has been covered in a layer of compost during late winter. I used the leaves to mulch my soil over winter and this eliminated weeds and created an abundance of worms (sadly though the moles like worms so now I am plagued with mole tunnels!)

So far my need to weed has been drastically reduced and plants have been growing very well. For me, mulching has replaced the need for endless weeding and no dig has saved me hours of work and an aching back etc. I know some others are trying this approach and it will be interesting to find out if they too have been successful.

I am not saying that no dig is the ideal solution. But using the available materials as a mulch, (and then as it decays it becomes a soil conditioner), seems logical as it emulates nature's natural cycle. Leaving the soil undisturbed is also more natural of course.

I urge others to try some of the above and make the most of the free organic material which we now have.

What's not to like?

Less weeding.

Less watering.

Improved soil fertility.

JD June 2021