



A26 Digging



Digging is very satisfying. You simply work up and down your growing area, turning over the soil and adding organic matter as needed (eg compost). It's hard work, but fine in small amounts, and a great opportunity for parents and the community to develop their skills and be involved in a gardening event (see A2).

Resources

- Prepared areas ready for digging, eg marked out/edged beds
- Tools, including spade, fork, soil rake and wheelbarrow
- Organic matter for soil improvement, if required, eg compost, well-rotted manure, leafmould or composted green waste from your local authority

Activity

- 1 Clear the area of grass and the largest perennial weeds (A14).
- 2 Gather people and tools together, organise to spread out across different areas that need digging, safe distances apart.
- 3 Divide the site into several smaller areas and follow instructions on the next page for single digging.

Extended activities

- 1 Celebrate your finished areas!
- 2 Enjoy a rest, and plan which plants to grow.

Top tip



When to dig

The ideal time for digging is when mud doesn't stick to your boots. Digging very wet soil results in compaction which reduces plant growth. If your soil is very wet, cover with plastic sheeting for a few weeks before digging. This helps keep the soil underneath drier and allows you to start digging earlier.

Health & Safety

Digging is a strenuous activity. Take regular breaks, digging only for short periods. Wear steel toe-capped boots.

See also Health and Safety Guidelines (Section B3.3)

Further information

A2 Organising a gardening day
A9 Testing soil and improving fertility
A14 Clearing weeds and grass
B4.4 Building soil fertility
Silver and Gold booklet (no-dig gardening)

Instructions for digging

The 'single' digging technique is all you need for growing most plants. You simply dig one 'spit' down - the depth of one spade or fork. This is about 15-30cm, adjusted depending on your tools and depth of the 'topsoil' (see B4.4/A9).

Single digging

- 1 Starting at the top of the area, dig a trench in a straight line across the shortest width. Put the soil you've dug out in a wheelbarrow.



- 2 Spread organic matter (see next page) at the bottom of the trench. Add a couple of spadefuls per square metre, a little more if the soil hasn't been cultivated before (see A9 for further application rates).



- 3 Dig another trench alongside, turning over the soil so it lands upside down on the organic matter. Break up any big lumps of soil (using a fork is easiest). Remove any roots of 'perennial' weeds as you go (eg dandelions).



- 4 Add organic matter to the bottom of the second trench. Continue working along the area, using the soil from the first in the wheelbarrow to fill in the last trench.



- 5 If you are sowing seed, use a soil rake to level the ground and create a 'tilth', a fine crumbly surface (A18).

Note: the digging pictured was for a very clayey and compacted soil. It will need further organic matter and cultivation over one or two seasons to create a finer surface, plus green manure (see Silver and Gold booklet).

In the meantime, sow seed in pots/trays and transplant into soil (A22). As soil improves, start by sowing larger seeds direct (eg beans).

Tips for using spades and forks

- Push spades and forks into the ground at a near vertical angle. Use one foot on the shoulder of the blade/prongs for extra weight and leverage. Keep your back upright, bending your knees when lifting or turning soil.
- Never load the spade or fork with more weight than comfortable.
- Try not to bury your feet to help avoid striking them accidentally with the blade or prongs (wear steel toe-capped boots).
- Regularly stand up straight and stretch.

Top tip



Letting weather do the work

With very heavy 'clay' soil (see A9), roughly dig in autumn to leave the soil exposed over winter. The frosty weather will help break down the larger lumps of soil. You can then rake over the soil in spring, or dig again if needed.

Top tip

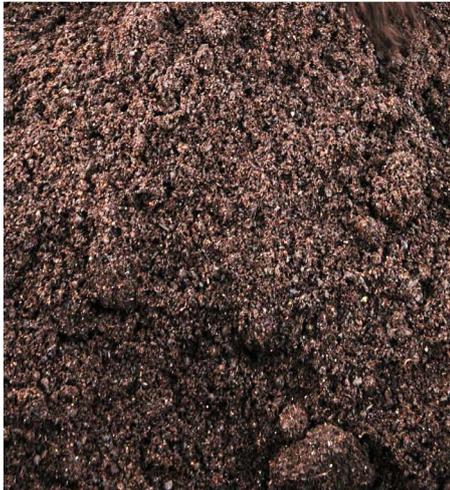


Digging deeper

Long term vegetables (eg asparagus) and fruit (eg apple trees) can benefit from the deeper layer of soil being loosened before planting. Just fork over the bottom of each trench to break up the soil as you go along. This further improves drainage and root growth.



Organic matter for soil improvement (see also A9)



Home-made compost (B5.7) or composted green waste from your local authority.



Well-rotted manure



Leafmould (composted leaves)