

Josh built this vegie patch in about half a day, with no digging and very little effort.

 ABC See Josh Byrne's no-dig gardening story on Gardening Australia, ABC1, Saturday, April 12 at 6.30pm.

# easy gardening

If you'd love to grow vegies but are hesitating because of poor growing conditions or a lack of time, JOSH BYRNE has an easy solution. The clever no-dig garden, built up with layers of organic material that breaks down to create a nutrient-rich bed, can be constructed almost anywhere, as long as it gets plenty of sun.

**B**efore you read any further, I must warn you – creating no-dig garden beds is a highly addictive activity! I made my first one in the backyard of our family home when I was 14 years old. I've had an overwhelming need to replace lawn with vegies ever since.

No-dig garden beds are quick and easy to construct, have terrific moisture holding properties and are a simple alternative for gardeners with soils that are not suitable for growing vegies.

A no-dig garden was the perfect option for friends of mine who were eager to start growing vegetables but were stuck with gutless, water-repellent sandy soil. They also had an expanse of lawn which they wanted to reduce, so both problems were solved at once.

No-dig gardens are also great for those with limited mobility, as they don't involve heavy digging and are raised to an easily accessible level.

Last, but certainly not least, no-dig vegie gardens are an excellent way for people who rent to have a quick vegie patch. If you move, the garden is readily removed and the area beneath restored.

### Selecting a site

One of the many advantages of no-dig garden beds is that they can be built on top of most surfaces, including an existing garden bed, lawn or even paving. A flat site is ideal but, if it's uneven, you can level it with branches and coarse mulch to form a kind of organic foundation. If you are building the garden bed over paving, then branches and coarse mulch should be used anyway to aid drainage.

Pick a spot that gets plenty of sun, as vegetables generally need at least six hours a day to thrive. Some leafy varieties such as silverbeet, English spinach and lettuce will tolerate less than this but, as a general rule, the more sun they receive the better. Providing the bed with shelter from strong winds is also important.

Also consider practical things such as easy access for materials and close proximity to a tap. Setting up your



vegie bed close to the house makes sense, because it makes harvesting more convenient and you are more likely to look after it than if it's in a less accessible part of the yard.

No-dig beds can be freestanding, or they can be retained to keep them neat and tidy, as with a typical raised garden bed. We decided to build a freestanding circular bed with a path in the middle to allow for easy access.

### Choosing materials

The materials used to make a no-dig garden bed are similar to those you need to use when making compost. Essentially, anything that is organic and that biodegrades quickly can be incorporated in the bedding.

The trick to achieving a good result is almost exactly the same as that which applies to making a properly working compost heap: getting a good combination of moist green material that is nitrogen-rich, and dry brown, high-carbon material (see *checklist, right*). Avoid using kitchen scraps, however, as they can become smelly and may attract flies and rodents. ▶

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### Materials checklist

**There are various recipes for making no-dig gardens. Here are my favourite ingredients.**

- **High carbon:** finely shredded tree prunings, straw and dry leaves (avoid eucalyptus).
- **High nitrogen:** lucerne, commercial compost, sheep or cow manure, blood and bone, and grass clippings.



## build a vegie patch

Follow our simple step-by-step guide to creating a no-dig vegetable garden that is easy to manage and maintain.

**1** **Mark out the garden** Start by marking out the area for the bed. An area of four square metres is a good size for a regular supply of vegies for two people. When making a circular shape, use a piece of rope secured to a central stake to mark out the bed's circumference. Use bamboo canes to mark the perimeter and the position of the central path.



**2** **Lay the foundation** When building a bed over lawn or weeds, you must kill and smother the existing vegetation. Apply a generous amount of blood and bone, and garden lime, then water it in well. This kills weeds and accelerates decomposition. Then spread out sheets of newspaper to deprive the weeds and grass of light. The layer must be at least 10–15mm thick and overlap, so the grass is unable to grow through. With the help of water and added lime and fertiliser, the grass and weeds soon rot away.

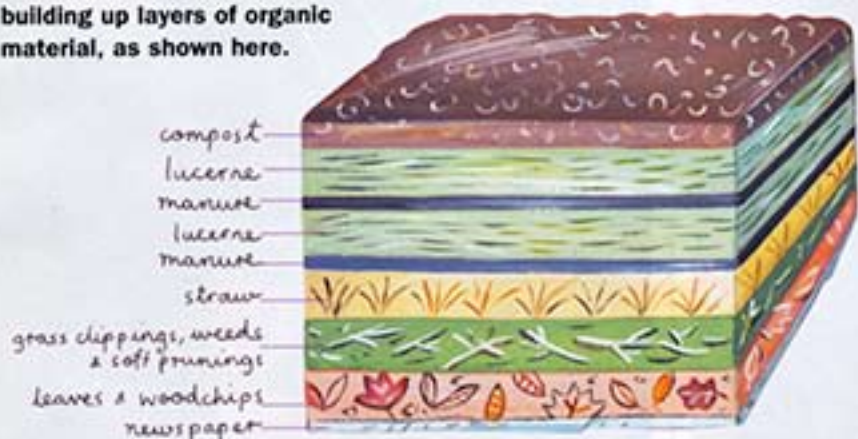
**TOP TIP** Before you begin, soak the bundles of newspaper in a wheelbarrow full of water, so the paper doesn't blow away when you are laying it.

**3** **Layer wet and dry material** The recipe I follow has eight layers, which are each 10cm thick, except for the manure and compost, which should be 5cm thick. Also, add alternating dressings of lime and blood and bone (see *diagram, top right*). Start with the coarsest material first (this includes dry leaves or woodchips), and then alternate layers of dry high-carbon material such as shredded prunings, dry leaves and straw, with high-nitrogen material such as grass clippings and manures. Apply a generous amount of blood and bone after each dry layer to help speed up decomposition, and add lime on top of each nitrogen-rich layer to keep the whole mix sweet (more alkaline). Water in each layer as you go. Moisture is essential to



## Cross-section of a no-dig garden

A no-dig garden is made by building up layers of organic material, as shown here.



speed up the decomposition of raw materials. When you're watering, use a trigger nozzle or adjustable hose fitting, so you can easily turn off the water flow when it's not needed.

**4 Make the path** Spread some woodchip mulch or sawdust along the keyhole path and also around the perimeter. Sawdust is nicer to walk on and helps to deter slugs and snails.

**TOP TIP** If your garden experiences windy conditions, use shredded tree prunings that don't blow away.

**5 Plant into pockets** The bed should initially sit about 60cm high, settling to around half this height over a week or two. If possible, wait for this settling to happen before planting. If you're itching to plant straightaway, you can create little planting pockets filled with potting mix, sprinkle some blood and bone and rock minerals over them, then plant seeds or seedlings and water immediately. Most vegies and herbs can be grown in no-dig gardens; just go for what's in season by asking at your local garden centre.

**6 The finished garden** Your vegies will take off in no time. Water restrictions permitting, place drip lines in loops around the beds at 30cm spacings, or handwater early in the morning. Either way, the beds have excellent moisture retention. Feed

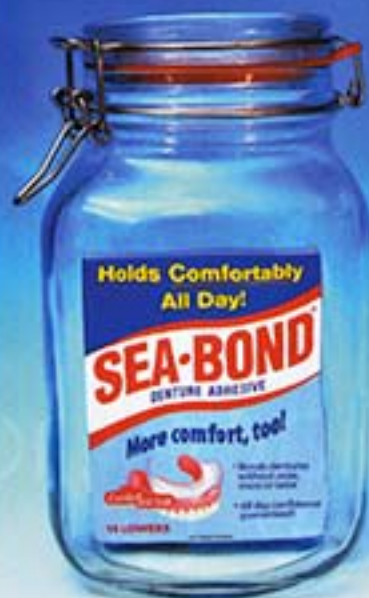
regularly with seaweed tonic and fish emulsion, as for a soil-based garden. Over time, top up with new layers of lucerne, manure and compost, so the height stays at about 30cm-40cm. You'll have lots of compost to use from all the spent vegetable crop material.

**TOP TIP** If your bed is on top of lawn, keep an eye out for grass runners that make it through the newspaper, and pull these out as soon as they appear until they eventually lose vigour. **GA**

### No-dig pioneer

The concept of no-dig gardening was pioneered by Sydney gardener, Esther Deans, in the 1970s. Her attempts to grow vegetables had been thwarted by the heavy clay soil at her property, so she decided to experiment with straw, fertiliser and compost – and the results were wonderful yields of vegies. For more information about this clever method of growing vegies, see Esther's fascinating book *No-dig Gardening and Leaves of Life*, published by HarperCollins, \$20.95, ISBN 9780732270995. This is a combination of her two previous publications, *Esther Deans' Gardening Book: Growing Without Digging* and *Leaves of Life: Creating Therapy Gardens for People with Disabilities*.

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