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How to Double Dig Your Garden

Why Double Dig?

Double digging loosens and aerates the soil. A garden with loose soil offers a great growing environment. Roots can grow easily and gather nutrients from the soil. Water can flow freely through the soil, and weeds can be pulled out by hand. With a loose soil, you can grow more plants in a certain area and thus get more vegetables from a smaller garden.

Tools and Materials You'll Need:

Soil rake	Buckets
D-handled spade	D-handled fork
Digging board (2' x 4' piece of plywood)	Compost (3 to 6 five-gallon buckets)

1. Prepare the bed:

Place stakes around your chosen garden area. (Our gardens are 4 feet by 12.5 feet in areas that receive at least six hours of sunlight per day.) Water the soil thoroughly for two or three days prior to your digging day. Then use a spading fork and your hands to pull up all the grass and weeds. (This could take a few hours.) Water the bed again for about five minutes two days in a row, soaking it completely. Let the bed rest one day before digging. (Alternatively, you can place newspapers and/or plastic over the bed for a minimum of two weeks prior to pulling out the plant material.) TOTAL TIME: up to five days

2. Ready to Dig

You are going to make a series of trenches the length of your bed. The first trench will have excess soil. For the rest of the trenches you will move the soil into the previous trench. Place your digging board across the width (the narrow part) of your bed. Use your spade to place the board about one spade's head back from the end of bed. Facing the end, dig your spade in. Try to get down in the soil at least 12 inches. (Don't worry if you can't do this the first time you double dig. You may be able to in future digs.) Place the soil you remove in a bucket or on a tarp. You may need to use this soil to fill in later, but if you don't, you can use it for starting seeds or making compost. Use your spade to scoop across the trench, removing any loose soil. Break up clods and remove rocks as you go.

3. Stick a Fork in It

Use your spading fork to loosen the soil in the trench. Work from the long side across the width. Push the fork in its entire depth, if possible. If not, just dig it in as far as it will go. Don't stress. It will go farther the next time you dig the bed. Wiggle the fork around, or pull it out and reposition it to get the tines down farther. Bend the handle back to loosen the soil. You might also want to shake the fork. Don't bring the tines all the way out of the soil. You don't want to flip out large pieces of the soil. If you are keeping count, this forking counts as the second dig, hence the name double digging.

4. Dig, Fork, Repeat

You are now ready for trench number two. Move the digging board back the length of the spade and start digging again. Dig down 12 inches and gently (using your knees, not your back) tip the spade and the soil into the first trench. You want to maintain the soil layers as closely as possible. Different microorganisms live in the different layers of the soil, and you want to preserve their habitat as much as possible. Continue this digging down the width of the trench. Scoop out any remaining soil into the first trench, and use your fork to loosen another 12 inches, as you did in step three.

5. Keep on Keepin' On

Now you've got it. Just keep going, trench after trench. After you've dug four trenches, rake the soil for that area and level it. Raking every four trenches is easier than waiting until the end and

raking all the loosened soil. If you are working on a very hot day, you might want to take this time to also water the raked soil.

6. Nearing the End

Once you have double dug the entire bed, rake it all and make it level. Now is the time to put the dirt from the first trench back in the bed, if you need it. Stop, wipe your brow, and pat yourself on the back. The hardest part is done. If you were able to dig down 24 inches, you don't need to double dig next season. If you didn't, you should try to double dig again, but it's not essential.

TOTAL TIME: 6–8 hours

7. Spreading It on Thick

Add up to one inch of compost on top of the soil. (The amount you use depends on the quality of your soil. For a 50 square foot bed, you will need 3 to 6 five-gallon buckets, or a quarter yard in gardening language.) Sift the compost into the soil by placing your fork about two to four inches under the top and wiggling it back and forth. You don't want to dig in the compost and disturb the soil layers you worked so hard to maintain. (If you cannot plant your bed as soon as you have finished digging it, cover it with a shade net (not plastic) and keep it moist. Add the compost just before you are going to plant.)

8. Water, Water Everywhere

Water the bed. Wait until the water has absorbed before you start planting. It's also probably a good time for you to take a break.

9. Planting Your Seeds and Seedlings

You are now ready to plant! Use the information on companion planting and spacing to create a plan for the bed. Then start planting. Use your digging board to reach into the bed and avoid compacting the soil. Remember once you have double dug your bed you do not want to walk in it. You can start at the north end of the bed and move down planting your seeds and seedlings along the way.

10. Water Again

You now need to give your plants a healthy drink of water. You should water enough that the soil is still shiny five seconds after you have finished watering.