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Till when? Explaining the devil we know

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: Even used on paths, boxes can discourage deer. These tomatoes have been protected by the slippery cardboard floor. (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

Tilling is the devil we know. Erosion, dustbowls and soil death may be its legacy, but it has produced enough food for a thousandfold population explosion over the millennia of its use. Unfortunately, that growth has been of humans and our symbionts (animals with whom we have exchange relationships) at the expense of virtually everything else.

As the late Northwestern permaculturist Toby Hemenway put it, “agriculture is the conversion of ecosystems into people.” If we want to grow food, medicine and fuel in a regenerative way on the planet that remains, we might want to do it from the ground up: by revisiting the ancient practice of tilling.

Though the Bible is a big fan of tilling, some ancients lamented its effects. Plato (2500 B.C.) wrote of the earth falling away from “the bones of the wasted body,” and Lucretius (99-55 B.C.) noted: “We dull the edges of our plowshares, and in return our fields turn mean and stingy, underfed.” They blamed deforestation and tilling for erosion, all of which continue apace today.

The theory behind no-till admittedly is not tailored for the crops Americans prefer: wheat, corn, potatoes, soybeans. In our South Sound climate, we are better suited to grow oats, rye, buckwheat, and thankfully still potatoes as staples. But it is only through experimentation that we will arrive at an adaptation of no-till that suits what we can grow. Science has no profitable incentive to do it for us.

In one of the few studies on the topic, researchers concluded that no-till crops underperformed in the first year with unbroken subsoil, but caught up in subsequent years. The aim is to leave the layers of soil that naturally settle and populate accordingly undisturbed.

Sheet mulching is one of the easiest ways to practice no-till and build soil. On Harstine plains and hills I have seen it smother lesser weeds and grasses, leaving worm-tilled soil littered with castings. (Fun fact: the worms in an acre of good garden soil move 18 tons of soil annually looking for food.) With fall approaching, this is the perfect time to let the rains rot your “lasagna beds” for spring planting.

Oregon State University has some advice germane to our region, which I modified a bit from personal experience: Start with mowing/scalping existing vegetation. Loosen the soil with a spading fork. Uproot any persistent weeds. Then cover the ground with up to six layers of newspaper and cardboard –

it's better than putting it in the blue bin. Brown cardboard is least controversial: some think that the metals used in glossy color printing are undesirable, others counter that worms and microbiology can remediate even that.

Wet the paperstock thoroughly and apply an inch of compost or manure. Follow that with an inch of carbonaceous litter (leaves, straw, bark). Continue to alternate these materials until the bed is 18 to 36 inches high. Always finish with a carbon layer to discourage flies, and a little wood ash will help deter slugs. Truth be told, they enjoy lasagna beds.

After six months or so of rotting, there will be plenty of life. Earthworms will have digested and distributed the decaying matter, enriching it with their castings that make nutrients, especially our scarce calcium, more stable and available. As Charles Darwin said, "All fertile areas of this planet have at least once passed through the bodies of earthworms." The beds will be ready for planting without further ado, and need only a good forking with each change of seasons to maintain aeration.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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