

## The Ugly Gardener-No-Till Gardening By Sheila O'Riley



I'm proud to be known as *The Ugly Gardener*. Why on earth would I be proud of this? It marks my commitment to manage my backyard, my small piece of this earth, in ways that benefit the environment, as well as, for my own enjoyment.

Let me explain--Over 25 years ago, a few adventurous, conservation minded farmers first began using the conservation practice of no-till farming. Just like it implies, no-till farming is planting crops in the previous year's crop residue with no tillage being done in the fields. Other farmers, who were accustomed to plowing their fields until there was nothing but black soil on top of the ground, called no-till farming *ugly farming*.

Today, no-till and minimum tillage are conservation practices commonly used and accepted by farmers. The practice helps conserve soil, conserve moisture, suppress weeds, and build soil structure.

I thought to myself that if farmers get all these conservation benefits from no-till farming, why can't I get the same benefits in my own backyard? Hence, I began practicing no-till gardening or some would say *ugly gardening*. It's all a matter of what you are accustomed to seeing. Bare soil in a garden has become *ugly* to me and mulch including organic kitchen scraps in a garden is beautiful in my eyes.

When I say no-till garden, I mean positively **no** tilling. I start by putting an organic weed barrier such as sheets of newspapers on top of the grass (or weeds). Then I add layers of mulch, each two to four inches thick. The mulches I use most often, as they are most available to me, are chipped wood, leaves (chopped is optional), and grass clippings. Start building the layers with the largest material to allow air circulation. Sometimes, I use a layer of compost or composted manure to facilitate the composting process.

Once the garden is *built*, I open up furrows in the mulch layers (don't tear the weed barrier) and lay down a one to two inch strip (wide and high) of soil to plant the seeds into. Sometimes, I mix flower seeds in soil and broadcast it over the mulch layers. For a potted plant, I open up a hole in the mulch, add a handful of soil around the root ball and pull the mulch back up around it.

I feel good about recycling organic material that would otherwise end up in the dump, conserving water, enriching the soil naturally, and improving the soil structure. And the best thing is that there are hardly any weeds! I may be *The Ugly Gardener*, but at least I don't spend hours in my gardens pulling weeds with my backside in the air.

To get started with **No-till**, see my "Basic No-till Garden Recipe" and "Organic Material that can be used to build a No-till Garden". Thank you!