

Ruth Stout, The No-Dig Dutchess

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<http://www.homestead.org/Gardening/Ruth%20Stout%20-%20The%20No-Dig%20Dutchess.htm>

In the early 1980s I went to Sussex, England to study small-scale agriculture at a Rudolf Steiner center called Emerson College. The course trained people to demonstrate good gardening methods in third world villages. I learned three ways to garden: the right way, the wrong way, and the easy way. The easy way was Ruth Stout's way.

The wrong way was obvious: industrialized farming, including the use of chemical fertilizers and poisonous pesticides, leading to the de-naturing of the precious soil. Everyone knew that this was destructive, and had been the downfall of many a third world village project. It was a given that a better method was required.

The right way was, of course, what they taught us at Emerson. It was a tough row to hoe, because the instructors were proponents not merely of digging, not just double-digging, but triple digging. This was a technique based on the ancient small-scale agricultural practices of hearty Gallic truck farmers on the outskirts of Paris as well as of terribly finicky, upper-class British rose growers and formal gardeners. Triple digging is organic and fanatical. It's done at Wisley and Kew. It involves cutting into the earth three spits (spade depths) down and systematically inserting various kinds of material from the most decayed compost – horse manure, preferably French - to the coarsest new-cut straw. It rebuilds soil and if you respect the earth and love to work (those with back problems, take warning) this is a rewarding method over the long haul. Along with “biodynamic preparations” made from diluted compost, triple

digging promises new, permanent soil vigor after a season or two. Certainly my teachers thought so. That was the “right way.”

Much as I wanted to be a good student, I was far more attracted to the "easy way," the less invasive approach of Ruth Stout – especially after a few weeks of the grueling physical labor involved in Steiner's soil building technique. The easy way was the precise antidote to all that physical hardship. American Ruth Stout called it “no dig, no work.” Even our excessively Euro-centric teachers gave grudging kudos to Ms Stout and her “permanent mulch” method. Stout was sufficiently kooky for the Steiner followers (also known as anthroposophists) to embrace unabashedly. She had a near-religious respect for the natural environment and, most importantly, believe it or not, her method does work. With provisos.

Born in Kansas in 1884, Ruth was a Quaker whose family worked a farm. She lived into her nineties, died in 1980, and developed a reputation for being brilliant, if eccentric. She laid claim to having smashed saloons to smithereens along with temperance queen Carrie Nation. The dates fit and no-one ever proved otherwise. Her famous brother Rex was also a gardener, entrepreneur and author. As most everyone knows, he penned the Nero Wolfe mysteries. Wolfe, who has his own website as though he were a real guy (he wasn't), was portrayed by Rex as a morbidly obese highly cerebral solver of mysteries who raised rare orchids in a penthouse roof garden. In real life Rex thought his sister crazy for her no-dig technique, calling her yard, affectionately one assumes, a “garbage dump.” But as one writer has correctly pointed out, Rex had servants to help him compost, and he was as strict about his composting as his hero Nero was about schedules for watering the orchids. Whereas Ruth had only herself and a rather dotty philosopher/carpenter partner, Richard Clemence, who probably wasn't the brawniest gnome in the garden.

So Ruth developed, or rediscovered, a gardening method that she claims, properly, was invented by God. For it was God who decreed that each year leaves would fall and cover the bare earth, and that in the spring, plants germinated under their blanket of leaves would miraculously regenerate. From this and other simple observations, Ruth decided that everyone should do what God does, and cover their garden area with “permanent mulch.” And then, as she had, they would discover that “There is peace in the garden. Peace and results.”

What, precisely, was she doing that excited so much dinner table conversation among homesteaders almost a generation ago? Precious little, by her own report. It was if anything a kind of deconstruction of gardening as it is generally understood. Permanent mulch, once built (and continually added to) simply lies in the garden between and among your plants - permanently. Now often called “The Stout Method” (though Ruth never named it and attributes the title to her faithful Richard), the technique ranged from the crude propagation of potatoes by just throwing them on the ground and leaving them to fend for themselves, to a rather more sophisticated packing order for mulch.

For starters, Ruth opined that any vegetation would make good mulch: hay, straw, leaves, pine needles, even household garbage without the meat and inorganic stuff. (When Ruth started her work, in less wasteful times, there wasn't much inorganic stuff in the kitchen bin.) In response to immediately arising suspicions that some of these materials might be too acidic (pine needles and oak leaves come to mind) she responded that if there was a problem of acidity, you could just use a little lime, offering wood ash as an example. Already we've gotten out of the realm of “no work” and into the realm of some work, and some understanding and vigilance. But let's not second guess the woman who created the system.

She recommended a bottom layer of household garbage (presumably the “hottest” or most active of the materials typically available to a small gardener) with a topping of a combination of leaves and hay. She was quite certain that “spoiled hay” was the best mulching material one could wish for, practically insisting on its use above (literally) all others. Whoops, did I mention that if you don’t have spoiled hay lying around, you’ll have to collect – or purchase - this staple of the permanent mulch system? And with the mulch needing to be at least 8 inches deep, that ain’t, if I may say so, hay. It’s another job of work for the no-work gardener, and though Ruth may have been correct that there are usually plenty of people willing to part with their used leaves and rotten hay, finding hay in sufficient quantities will present a problem and almost certainly an expense (if not a great one).

Ruth recommended throwing an “armful” of hay on any spot where the mulch looked thin. Richard, the more accurate of the two, postulated that you’d need a whopping 25 fifty-pound bales of hay for a garden plot 50 feet by 50 feet and estimated this to be “about a half-ton of loose hay. That should give a fair starting cover, but an equal quantity in reserve would be desirable.”

Ruth always suggested starting NOW, and not worrying about growing seasons. This is counter-intuitive stuff; most would assume that mulching is an autumn task, but Ruth pointed out that if you wait, the sun will have baked your crop THIS season – she recommended you begin as soon as you finish hearing one of her talks or reading one of her books (or this article). Run, don’t walk, to the nearest repository of sour hay.

Grass clippings and household garbage are two mulch materials most of us have in abundance even if we

don't farm. Ruth, a thrifty soul, also suggested following after your local utility workers as they trim tree limbs overhanging the road, to appropriate the fallen branches they leave behind. If you can get them before the chipper does (there weren't any chippers in Ruth's time). This activity can be slotted in on your "no-work" schedule between visits to the neighbors after a wet spell, offering to carry away their moldy hay.

Ruth has been called an "evangelist" or a "guru" of gardening and indeed her system sounds quite inspiring and still attracts "converts." People who try her method (or one of the many more modern spin-offs) are generally predisposed to making it work, and will report that it's mostly trouble free, that the mulch keeps the good plants moist and feeds them, while refusing to let weeds grow. Ruth zealously asserted that weeds wouldn't grow in hay because they were under the hay, but if they did, you could just turn the hay upside down. Yes, yes, this is work, but look at all the work she has saved you. And, contrariwise, the seeds of vegetables, also under the hay, would grow with no tending because they were being lovingly sheltered, warmed and kept moist by the hay. The same hay that somehow disallows the growth of weeds. This is illogical, you insist – how can the same material both encourage the good plants and discourage the bad ones? But Ruth was sure it could and her books may convince you too.

Permanent mulch (not to be confused with products like crunched bits of rubber and the samey-looking stones known as rip rap, currently marketed under that name) does require "feeding." And more than a little attention, depending on what you're using to build your stacks. Hay, which in this day and age is not cheap and plentiful as it must have been for Ruth, is full of – hayseeds! To keep them down, one hardy Stoutite lifts, turns and smashes the hay several times a season, but still cheerfully reports "it's a

whole lot easier than hoeing or tilling.”

Ruth answered almost every question about her method with the words “more mulch.” Got worms, slugs, borers? More mulch. Soil too wet underneath? You need more mulch. Weeds creeping in? More mulch. Time to plant, time to harvest, time to prime the soil or put it to rest for the winter? Heap on some more mulch.

Starting in 1953, Ruth wrote articles for *Organic Gardening* magazine, whose archives are a source of information about the method. As her fame grew among hardcore gardeners and small-holders, people put her ideas to the test under different conditions and in different climates from those in her chosen home in Connecticut. Then she was constrained, if not entirely willingly, to revise her method slightly. On paper, at least.

For instance, she acknowledged that in the spring after a hard winter, the mulch piles need to be opened up slightly to let in the warmth of sunlight to create greater heat for decomposition. In addition, mulch primarily composed of leaves and hay might consume more nitrogen than it gives out, at least initially, and the attentive gardener would want to add something to specifically torque up the nitrogen level. It really isn't enough to put just any vegetation on your first permanent mulch; if you want to have success, you need go by the same rules that successful mulchers use to get the system working for you.

One chore that would certainly be eliminated by employing Ruth's method is composting. She was one of the first gardeners to envision that you can put the decaying matter directly where it's needed and skip the middle and tedious step of constructing compost piles. I thought this a jolly fine notion after months of toiling away in gray, chill-to-the-bone English weather creating and turning steamy heaps of

rotting vegetation as part of Rudolf Steiner's arcane philosophy. Down with compost, I may have muttered. The most conscientious Stout gardener would have to do is judiciously recycle, reserving the good stuff for the bottom layer of the no-work permanent mulch pile.

Another advantage to the mulch approach is that your garden area won't be muddy – or caked dry. No matter how fat or thin or nitrogenous or limey your mulch may be or what materials you use to build it, it will almost certainly keep the soil around your precious plants from flooding or sizzling. And this leads to advantage three: no watering. If all goes as Ruth planned, the mulch around each plant will hold moisture in precisely the right quantity to sweetly dampen without over-watering. Never too wet, never too dry.

Basic and boiled down to its essence, the Stout Method is no-till, no-dig, no-water, no-weed and no-composting – but not no-work. It mainly depends on your idea of work. If you're just starting out, and have never had a serious back problem, you might think it easier to scrape the earth a bit and add some seeds, and then pull up the weeds as they appear. After a few seasons of this, you may come to realize that scraping often involves the use of costly machinery and weeding has become the chore you love to hate. Then you may turn to Stout's books and articles with a different attitude. You'll find it easy to become entranced and throw in the trowel. Older gardeners and those with back trouble swear by Stout, possibly inspired by the image of Ruth herself scattering armfuls of hay around into her nineties.

Just read her works with a grain of (organic sea) salt.

Quaker Ruth, who was no liar, asserted that she had never seen rats or mice in her garden. But others

are not so lucky, and also have moles and voles to worry about. Smearing your flower beds with gooey household garbage is like setting out a sign that says “Eat at Joe’s” in rat-speak. Ruth's solution would undoubtedly have been - more hay.

Being a nature lover and eschewing inorganic solutions, Ruth would never have allowed plastic in her garden, but many of us nowadays find that a layer of black landscaping cloth or its equivalent can be a powerful retardant to weed growth where you just don’t want weeds, such as around a path, and it isn’t counter to the system. One devotee of the Stout regimen uses a good, unsullied mound of mulch where nitrogenous productivity is required and then tops it off with plastic. The plastic becomes the equivalent of Ruth’s ubiquitous rotting hay. And may be less expensive.

Success rates for Stout’s permanent mulching are, as I indicated, somewhat weighted in that anyone who tries it will likely do what’s necessary to make it function because of a belief that it should be better than conventional methods. Most people who declare themselves to be actively engaged in the inactive non-work of permanent mulching a la Stout have bitter memories of hoeing baked earth and weeding on hands and knees for sweaty hours at a time. They sing the praises of new earthworm populations under the mulch and the quietness of gardening without machinery (while simultaneously recommending that you run your leaves through a mower before adding it to the mix).

Ruth Stout had a soul brother in contemporary Masanobu Fukuoka, a Japanese proponent of no-till agriculture which he ascribed to traditions of good animal husbandry among his countrymen. His classic *One-Straw Revolution* (Rodale 1978) is the field and farm equivalent of Ruth’s minimalist methods for small scale home gardening. Both will convince you that no-till or no-dig is natural and productive -

unless you're just, as my teachers were, determined to triple dig. Both Stout and Fukuoka have many current-day disciples. It is not known whether they ever met.

Ruth was a genuine 24-carat eccentric who was known to garden in the nude (though she generally donned a granny sack dress). She is quoted as having said, "The un-mulched garden looks to me like some naked thing which for one reason or another would be better off with a few clothes on." This is the kind of remark that would have bugged the obsessive Rex and his alter ego, Nero Wolfe. It's likely that she enjoyed her role as a gardening gadfly. She complained with self-deprecating amusement that when she walked in a room, conversation suddenly turned to the subject of mulch. She could be somewhat acidic herself. Here's an answer she gave in an interview about her method, in *FAs, How to Grow Vegetables and Fruits by the Organic Method*, (Rodale, 1961):

"Now, for the drawbacks. People have complained to me that mulching does not kill everything. I just got a letter from someone saying that it won't kill cockleburrs, morning glories, Johnson grass, nut grass. She left out witch grass. I know that it won't kill that and neither will it pick your peas or plant your seeds. I am just saying (in a friendly, sarcastic way) that just because it does 100 things for you, should it be expected to do 101?"

Luckily for anyone who wants to follow Ruth's dynamic example, she wrote at least a dozen books detailing her anti-method, including *The Ruth Stout No-Work Garden Book*, *Gardening Without Work for the Aging, the Busy and the Indolent* and *How to Have a Green Thumb Without an Aching Back*. She also composed numerous articles for *Organic Gardening* between 1953 and 1971. Remarkably, giving an idea

of how great a time-span her life's work covered, there is a Ruth Stout video in which she demonstrates her permanent mulching method. Among her last written works were the charmingly titled *I Always Did It My Way*, and *Don't Forget to Smile*, or *How to Stay Sane and Fit Over Ninety*. All of these materials are available with a little web searching, though none are currently in print. It should be said that her no-work method left her plenty of time to write books. Her writing was human, happy and homespun, belying the very analytical bent of her excellent mind.