

This is a printer-friendly version of an article from Zip06.com.

Article Published August 18, 2015

Out with the Old, In with the New Garden Beds

Kathy Connolly

Whenever gardeners talk about the best method to create new lawns, flower or veggie beds, someone is likely to quip, “Just rototill it.”

Forgive me, rototiller fans, those whirring tines have their place, but it is not the first place, in my opinion. Rototilling routs the old vegetation, but it also brings weed seeds to the surface in droves. If you use a tiller, you may also need to use several rounds of weed killers before planting the new bed. Rototilling can also disturb soil structure and some of the beneficial creatures that live in soil.

Nancy DuBrule-Clemente, owner of Natureworks Horticultural Services in Northford, says that, instead of rototilling, her company uses two methods of creating new beds.

“If we need to plant right away,” she says, “we use a gas-powered sod cutter, compost the sod, add finished compost and organic fertilizers, scratch it in, and plant.” She adds, “Only if the soil is compacted, due to construction for instance, do we rototill. We never till in the old vegetation.”

If the project is on a more leisurely schedule, the Natureworks team smothers the new bed or lawn area with plain cardboard or weed barrier paper, then places mulch over the barrier and removes it at a later date for planting.

“If you smother in August, it takes about four to six weeks to kill the vegetation,” says DuBrule-Clemente. “We do not remove the killed vegetation in this scenario. We let it break down and make sheet compost.” As for the lurking “weed seed bank” that exists in most soil, “We disturb the soil as little as possible when planting and continue smothering and mulching if weeds appear.”

She recommends the book *Weedless Gardening* by Lee Reich for a good description of top-down soil management techniques.

Many people ask about the use of black plastic or pond liners as smothering materials.

“Unless you are smothering weeds over a driveway or gravel bed, or covering a poison ivy trunk, we do not recommend it,” says DuBrule-Clemente. “Plastic can disturb microbe populations in the soil.”

Petie Reed and Rich Oliver, co-owners of Perennial Harmony in Waterford, have a slightly different approach.

“We use a sod-kicker,” says Reed, referring to their Quail Manual Sod Cutter. “You just apply your foot on the press bar and push forward. It cuts the sod and you roll it up when you are finished with a row.”

The tool has been made in the U.S. by the Minnesota firm since 1953.

Oliver, who does most of their garden installations, says he can clear 500 square feet in a few hours with the sod-kicker, without undue exertion.

“It’s more a matter of technique than strength,” says Oliver. “Your efficiency improves after using it a bit.”

He says it helps to “scalp” the grass or weeds very low with a mower before sod-kicking.

“If the soil is relatively clear of rocks and gravel, the tool goes down three inches very easily,” he adds.

The Perennial Harmony team adds a layer of coir over the newly bared ground. Coir is organic matter, a peat substitute made of shredded coconut shells. It improves the soil’s moisture-holding capacity and provides a degree of aeration.

“Then we rake it repeatedly,” says Oliver.

They plant and mulch soon after that.

“We don’t see many weed problems after sod-cutting,” says Reed.

Reed's favorite over-the-winter technique is a thick layer of shredded leaves, at least six inches, over the intended garden bed. The leaves settle down and, according to Reed, don't blow around.

"You don't even need cardboard if you do it this way," she says. "In the spring, we plant directly into the leaf compost."

Note: Neither of these landscape teams uses weed killers to clear beds for new planting.

Do you need to apply fertilizers, lime or amendments? Here are three soil test resources to help answer that question: UConn soil test lab at 860-486-4274; Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station at 203-974-8521; Harrington's Organic Land Care at 800-675-8733.

Mid-August marks the beginning of the best six weeks of the year to start new lawn installation and fresh garden bed development. Enjoy!

Kathy Connolly is a landscape designer, garden writer and speaker from Old Saybrook. Email: Kathy@SpeakingofLandscapes.com. Website: www.SpeakingofLandscapes.com.