



No Dig/No Work Gardening Ruth Stout, Gardening Gadfly

Joanne Brown, Frederick County Master Gardener, Special to News Post

Tired of composting, weeding and fertilizing? Try gardening the Ruth Stout “No Dig/No Work” way!

Who was Ruth Stout?

One of 9 children, Ruth Stout (1884–1980) lived in Kansas until she was 18, when she moved to New York City. At the age of 45, she married, moved to the country, and began gardening the hard way—according to the gardening “experts” of her day.

But she quickly realized that “their way” required lots of digging and hard work. She experimented with her own garden and realized that great flower and vegetable gardens could be grown with little or no digging, little or no work, and lots of hay!

Hay?

Yes. The secret to Ruth Stout’s “No Dig/No Work” method is keeping a thick mulch of any vegetable matter that rots on vegetable and flower gardens. Eight inches of rotting hay was the best thing you could do to a garden, she maintained. Spoiled low quality (not suitable to feed) hay is cheaper to buy and both fertilizes the soil and keeps the ground moist. In fact, hay keeps the ground so moist that Stout claimed she did not need to water her garden for 35 years!

Just hay?

No, she didn’t limit her mulching material to hay. She also tossed grass clippings, straw, leaves, pine needles, sawdust, weeds, and kitchen scraps (eggshells, etc.) directly onto her garden. She didn’t bother with a separate compost pile —her garden **was** her compost pile.

What was Ruth Stout’s advice for weeds?

Stout maintained that you shouldn’t bother weeding. When weeds begin to pop through the hay, just throw another armful of hay on them.

Does this “No Dig/No Work” method really work?

This non-invasive method worked so well for Stout that she grew all of the vegetables needed by herself and her husband for 14 consecutive years.

To “plant” potatoes, she simply threw sprouted potatoes on the ground, covered them with hay, and let them fend for themselves. They produced lots of healthy potatoes – the no dig/no work way! She planted seeds the same easy way.

But isn't it work putting hay on a garden all the time?

Yes, there is some work involved, of course—buying hay, and then tossing it on the garden (she recommended starting with a healthy 8 inches of hay mulch, distributed evenly around the flower and vegetable gardens. After that, the only work would be tossing down more hay, whenever the height of the hay goes down too far, or whenever an unwanted plant (also known as a weed!) pops through.

So yes, there is some work involved. But think of the work you no longer have to do when you choose this effective gardening method!

No more hoeing (which can damage the soil structure and bring to the surface unwanted weed seeds that have been slumbering in the dirt for decades).

No more weeding.

No more composting.

No more hard physical labor.

Just lots of flowers, vegetables, and healthy soil.

How can I learn more about Ruth Stout's method of gardening?

Her published books include *How To Have A Green Thumb Without An Aching Back – A New Method Of Mulch Gardening*, *The Ruth Stout No-Work Garden Book*, and *Gardening Without Work: For the Aging, the Busy, and the Indolent*.

Anything else interesting about Ruth Stout?

Stout preferred gardening “in the buff.” And Rex Stout, author of the Nero Wolfe detective stories, was her brother.

Also, one night when she was 16 years old, Stout went around Topeka, Kansas with temperance leader Carrie Nation, smashing saloon windows. She later regretted this action, advising people to “Do what you want to do and don't tell other people how to behave.”

Good advice from an eccentric gardener.

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, (301) 600-1596, or visit <http://www.frederick.umd.edu/>. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.