

ORGANIC Gardening

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That Keep Your
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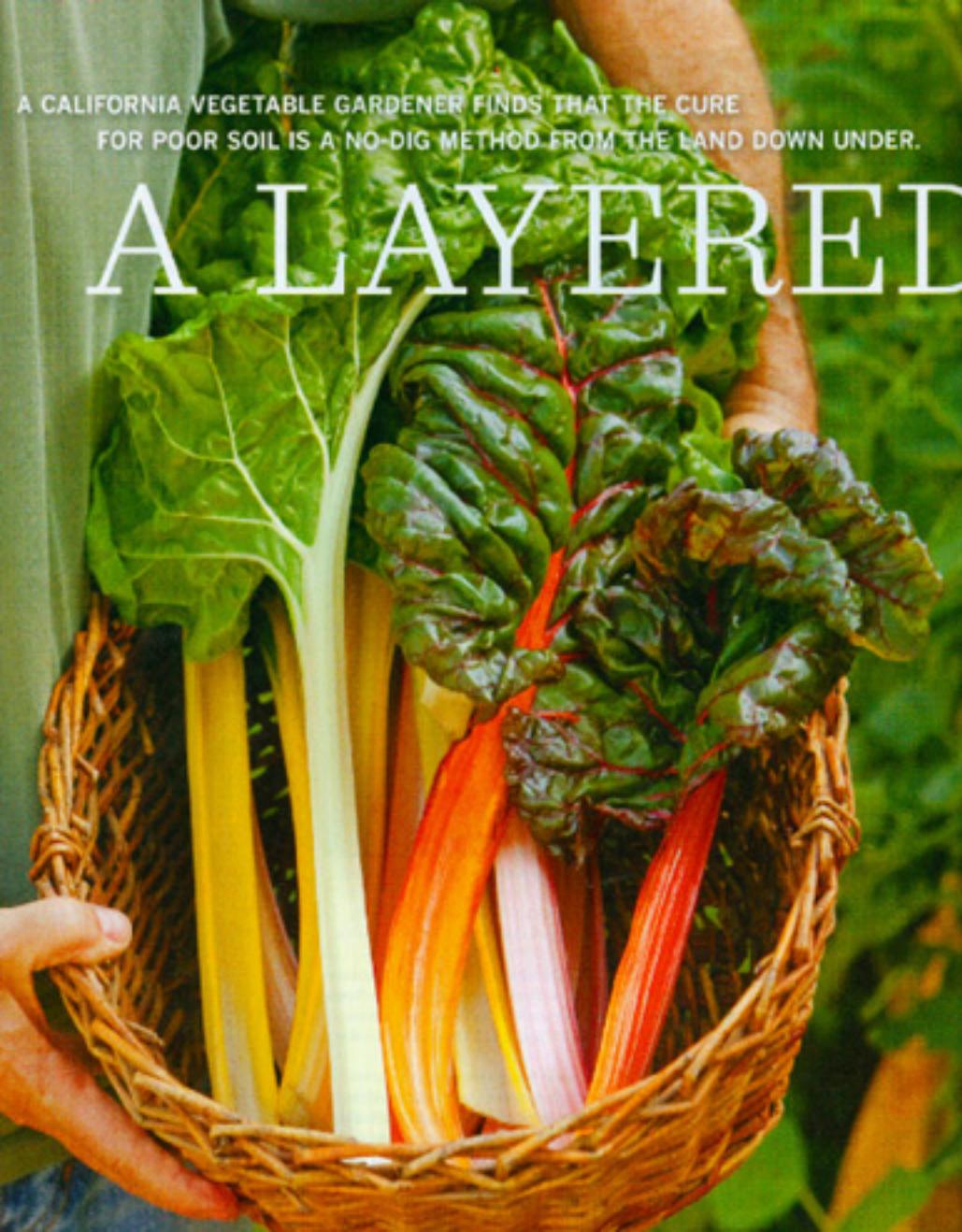
BEGIN A NO-DIG VEGETABLE GARDEN

* Glossy 'Red Bartlett'
pears decorate
the Holm girls'
harvest table. p.38



A CALIFORNIA VEGETABLE GARDENER FINDS THAT THE CURE
FOR POOR SOIL IS A NO-DIG METHOD FROM THE LAND DOWN UNDER.

A LAYERED



APPROACH

By Debbie Prinzing • Photography by Jack Cuyler





Previous page, left: "Straight Eight" Solar chard. **Right:** Dan Marfisi and Marlene tending zucchini from no-dig gardens. **This page, left:** "Early Girl" tomatoes. **Below:** Left: A brick path flanked by drought-tolerant natives. **Right:** Water-saving irrigation system.

To reach Pat Marfisi's small but prolific vegetable garden, you drive through a winding labyrinth of narrow streets and then climb high into the Hollywood Hills. His 1940s ranch house is perched at the top of a steep, quarter-acre parcel—a slender wedge of land terraced with California natives, Mediterranean plants, and fruit trees. In a neighborhood populated by million-dollar-plus homes and their famous rock-and-sign, it's surprising to find an urban gardener tending to his organic crop of tomatoes, zucchini, kale, chard, spinach, beans, basil, and pumpkins.

In a few hundred square feet, Marfisi grows enough food to feed himself and to share. This bounty results from a high-volume, low-impact gardening technique inspired by the late Esther Deans, a self-taught Australian gardener who wrote *Esther Deans' Gardening Book: Growing without Digging*.

Deans describes growing food crops in a layer-cake-like pile of newspaper, alfalfa hay, straw, compost, bloodmeal, and bone-meal. Vegetables flourish in the 36-inch-tall, nutrient-rich medium, which ultimately decomposes to improve the native soil beneath it. Once that occurs, a new layered pile can be built in its place. Deans's method is "ideal for anyone who wants to grow their own vegetables, greens, and herbs in a small space," Marfisi says. Harvesting a head of endive greens, he describes how to fine-tune the bitter leaves and then sauté them, Italian style, with garlic and olive oil. "I'm getting hundreds of meals out of this patch," Marfisi says. "And it produces intense flavor."

From Corner Office to Pen Patch

A longtime management consultant to Fortune 500 clients, Marfisi for years had little time to garden. He and his late wife, Beth, asked Los Angeles landscape designer Nick Williams to design a low-water garden, stair-stepped into the mid, rocky hillside where giant agave plants have thrived for years. But these conditions are less than conducive to growing vegetables. "The geology of the Hollywood hills is set up so that the nutrients run out of the soil," Marfisi explains. "So you work and work and you end up with a tiny cauliflower."



How to Grow without Digging

Build a better vegetable patch with the no-dig method, recommended for organic farms in rural Australia. The no-dig idea are fairly stable, but some gardeners prefer to build layers to contain them. Various materials serve, including 1- to 12-inch layers, bricks, concrete blocks, stacked stones, or a stacked frame of chicken wire. The materials below are enough to build a 4-by-6-foot raised bed:

- 2 to 3 pounds bloodmeal and bone-meal
- Newspaper
- 1 bag of alfalfa-free straw hay
- 1 cubic foot of no-chill 3-inches-long straw, not seed straw, which has viable seeds
- 10 cubic feet of compost (generally home-made)

1. Moisten the soil thoroughly with a hose and add a generous dusting of bloodmeal and bone-meal. Wear a mask to avoid inhaling the dust. Repeat the watering and dusting step after adding each layer to the pile.
2. Cover the ground with ½ to 1½ inch of strawclippings.

3. Place 8-inch-wide crads of straw hay on top of the newspaper.

4. Add 4-inch-deep pieces of straw on top of the straw hay.

5. Top with 4 inches of compost.

6. Plant vegetable seeds or root seeds in the compost layer. Top there with more straw or straw clippings.

7. Between crops, regenerate the top layer with 2 to 3 inches of straw and 3 to 4 inches of compost.

OTHER TIPS:

Don't skip on compost. "This method needs it lot, so start a compost pile or find a good source of compost elsewhere," Marfisi advises.

Don't skip the bloodmeal and bone-meal (photo A, below). Bloodmeal adds nitrogen and bone-meal adds phosphorus to the soil, which is key to fostering decomposition of the hay and straw.

Start with shallow-rooted plants in the first month or two (B). "Plant seedlings rather than seeds in the first crop," he says.

Keep young seeds and seedlings moist (C). Watering can be cut back significantly after plants are 6 to 7 inches tall.

**1 inch of straw Layering
Bloodmeal/Bone-meal**

**2 inches of Compost
Bloodmeal/Bone-meal**

**8 inches of Straw Bed
Bloodmeal/Bone-meal**

**4 inches of Alfalfa Bed
Bloodmeal/Bone-meal**

**1 ½ - 2 inches of Newspaper
Bloodmeal/Bone-meal**

**Ground Level
Bloodmeal/Bone-meal**





Left: An environmentalist built this urban wall made of local stones repurposed from a former patio. Although making walls like this requires a bit of muscle, they are quick and simple to build, either without a fence, below, or with, see, right.



"Many places in Australia have poo impoverished soil, but I was seeing the no-dig kind farming happening everywhere there."

In 2002, Marfisi retired, closed his firm, and swapped his business suit for a straw hat and a pair of garden gloves. He enrolled in plant-identification and pruning classes at the UCLA Extension horticulture program, embracing a lifelong interest in botany and plants. "I was into gardening in my head long before I could actually do it," he confides. "I always felt that little call inside me, that I needed to be connected to the earth."

Since he's trim and athletic with an energizing manner, you wouldn't guess Marfisi is in his mid-60s by watching his agile movements in the garden. Followed closely by his dog Va Bene, named for the Italian phrase "going well," Marfisi can be found there each morning, checking the progress of his crops, which border a mulched path in a 10-by-10-foot space. His harvests salad greens, heirloom tomatoes, and summer squash for the day's meal, occasionally refreshing the top of each 4-by-1-foot raised bed with new layers of organic compost and fertilizer. He may spend a lot of time here, but it's not as much as you'd think to enjoy the moment. The garden has more vigor, and so does he. "I finally now feel like I'm starting to be a gardener," he says.

Esther Deans's Method

While his UCLA studies convinced Marfisi of the value of adding more native and low-water-use ornamentals to his backyard, it took traveling to New Zealand and rural Australia, including Tasmania—places with even more challenging cultural conditions than drought-battered Southern California—to change the way he grows vegetables.

After losing Ruth to cancer in 2005, Marfisi took many of his friends by surprise when in 2007 he volunteered as a WWOOFer (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms; www.woof.org). This international program matches organic farmers with volunteer workers in exchange for meals and lodging.

Traveling, living, and farming "down under" was a major lifestyle change. "All I had was a backpack and one tiny suitcase."



Marfisi says, "I signed up to work at six farms in 4 months." At age 60, laboring six days a week alongside younger WWOOFers, Marfisi handled the physical demands of tilling, hauling, and planting and became as strong as if he had worked as a long-distance runner. He loved the challenge and the sense of completion that the hard work of farming provided.

It was in Australia that he discovered the "no-dig" food gardening method. By necessity, given her sandy, infertile soil, Esther Deans chose this organic, above-ground environment in which to grow vegetables—and in 1977 shared her experiences in a best-selling book. Her lessons resonated with Marfisi, and he transcribed pages of Deans's advice into a spiral notebook, which came home with him after the WWOOF project ended.

Marfisi reimagined and adapted what he learned half a world away to his own property's soil and Southern California's arid climate. For example, while Deans finished a bed with only compost as the topsoil layer, Marfisi works blood- and bone-meal into the compost, and then top-dresses the newly planted seedlings with straw to keep them from drying out.

A Prolific Urban Garden

The methods Marfisi learned in Australia are not original to Esther Deans. They are similar to layered sheet-mulching techniques popularized by others, including Ruth Stout, an American who wrote *How to Have a Great Thrush without an Aching Back* in 1941, and Japanese researcher Masanobu Fukuoka, who began practicing and popularizing a "do nothing" approach to growing in 1961. In the late 1990s, Patricia Lakin wrote about a simple layered technique in *Rodale's League Gardening*. While those approaches vary slightly, their concepts will appeal to anyone with poor soil in search of less labor-intensive food growing.

The tiny Hollywood Hills幸运 that Marfisi now tends to a growing lab for his newfound practices as well as a beautiful food source. As vegetable roots extend through layers of straw, straw, and compost, they are insulated from extreme hot or cold temperatures, kept from drying out (thus requiring less frequent irrigation), and virtually weed- and pest-free. He boosts the garden's productivity by top-dressing beds with straw and organic compost and rotating crops to maximize yields. "Everyone who uses this method is a big composter," he points out.

Marfisi can't imagine going through the effort of ever digging a hole again. "To me, this approach requires a lot less work than traditional planting," he says. "My garden is more productive, and it feels good not to water often."

Borrowing rural Australian farming methods for use in urban back yards, the no-dig enthusiast shares Esther Deans's recipe with community groups, local schools, and even strangers who track him down on the Internet. "The time is right for this way of gardening," Marfisi says. "It's very easy and it works everywhere."



Above: This path, made of decomposed granite and bordered by Marfisi's frost-free grass, leads to Marfisi's house.
Right: Marfisi moves seeds planted close together into a nearby bed in BedDent, a sharp-bladed hand tool.



For more information, see *Find It Here* on page 66.