

Are you a lazy gardener? (published 2025-09-13)
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The concept behind “lazy gardening” is that you can do more gardening and get bigger yields with a lot less work than traditional gardening. Lazy gardening means less digging, less fertilizing, less insect and disease management and even less weeding (eventually).

Unfortunately, we can’t just walk away from our traditionally planted garden with bare soil and widely spaced crops and expect good results. But with planning and some strategic steps, you can be lazier in your garden and still grow a lot of beauty and food.

The successful lazy garden relies on working *with* nature - building healthy soil creates healthy plants that don’t need fertilizing and are more resistant to pest and disease pressure. Keeping the ground covered with mulch and dense plantings leaves less room for weeds to grow, which means less time doing the hard work of weeding.

The first step is to stop digging and tilling your established beds. Every time you till, you reduce the soil’s organic matter, bring weed seeds to the surface and kill the microbial life that feeds your plants. Tilling also increases compaction by damaging the soil structure. You may need to till to start a new bed, but you do not need to till every season or with every addition of compost.

The second step to healthy soil and stronger plants is to keep the soil covered, with both mulch and with plants (sometimes called “green mulch”). Choose a mulch that decomposes. You may have to spread it more often, but your soil will be healthier and your plants will be stronger without needing to fertilize as often.

To mulch in the lazy gardener’s way. Be sure to use a mulch that feeds your soil - wood chips, straw, grass clippings, leaves, even pine straw. All eventually break down and feed the soil microbes that make for a healthy soil. Plants grow more vigorously and are more pest- and disease-resistant in healthy soil.

A thick wood or straw mulch makes it harder for weeds to grow but they *will* still pop up. They can be further crowded out by dense and diverse planting. In our hot and humid climate, you should not squish your tomatoes or roses together but, to crowd out weeds, you can intercrop - put other plants between your main crop.

You could plant French marigolds (*Tagetes patula*), which emit a toxic chemical that prevents nematodes from hatching. Add yarrow (*Achillea*) or sweet alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*) which attracts the braconid wasps that will destroy the tomato hornworm from the inside out. To increase the productivity of a bed, interplant a taller plant (like tomatoes) with a shorter plant with more shallow roots, like lettuce, which will appreciate the shade of the tomatoes.

Use interplanting (sometimes called companion planting) to make your landscape and flower beds more resilient and productive, as well. Instead of a whole row of roses, which could be quickly wiped out by rose rosette virus, make your landscape less vulnerable with more variety. A garden bed with dahlias, zinnias, roses, lavender and more won’t be decimated by one disease.

As lazy as you want to be in the heat of the summer, it is crucial that you pull weeds before they have a chance to set a flower and create seeds. Be sure you always dispose of invasive weeds and plants. You can learn to recognize our invasive weeds with the University of Tennessee resource below.

Lazy gardening is not quite as idle as *not* gardening. But if you focus on covering the soil, planting diversely and learning about weeds, you can spend more time enjoying your garden, eating fresh tomatoes and less time weeding, fertilizing and fighting pests.

References:

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“Root-knot Nematodes - Bio-control with Marigolds,” <https://www.ces.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Root-Knot-Nematodes-Biocontrol.pdf>

“Garden Allies - Braconid Wasps,” <https://pacifichorticulture.org/articles/braconid-wasps/>

“Companion Planting & Botanical Pesticides: Concepts & Resources,”
<https://attra.ncat.org/publication/companion-planting-resources/#3>

“Companion Planting for Roses,” <https://libguides.nybg.org/companionplantingroses>

“Rose Rosette Disease,” <https://extension.okstate.edu/fact-sheets/rose-rosette-disease.html>

“Guide for Identification and Management of Invasive Plants Species Common in Riparian Areas of East Tennessee,” <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/W1198.pdf>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IklH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site: <https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

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