



A14 Clearing weeds and grass



There are several methods of removing weeds and grass described below that can be adapted to your needs. Remember you don't necessarily have to clear the whole site immediately, but just the space you need for the first year's growing. These activities are a great opportunity to involve the community (see A2).

Resources

- Tools including: spade, fork, wheelbarrow, string, canes
- Light-excluding mulch and organic matter (see below)
- The garden design showing the location of new vegetable patches, etc (see B4.3 for example plan)

Activity

- 1 Using the garden design as a guide, mark out the location and shape of the growing beds with garden line and canes. This may not be necessary if clearing a whole growing space including areas for paths.
- 2 Follow detailed instruction on the next page as required
 - a Digging to remove weeds and weak/patchy grass
 - b Applying a light-excluding mulch to kill weeds
 - c Lifting and stacking grass turves

Extended activities

- 1 Build paths between the vegetable patches (see B4.10 and A6).
- 2 Organise a 'gardening day' by inviting pupils, parents and local people to help clear the space. See A1 and A2.

Health & Safety

Be careful when handling weeds. Many have sharp, rough, or sticky growth and the rootballs can be heavy. Follow safety guidelines for garden tool use (B3.2) and digging (B5.8), together with Manual Handling guidance if lifting turf and moving wheelbarrows (B3.4).

See also Health and Safety Guidelines (Section B3.3)

Further information

A1 Hosting an annual event
A2 Organising a gardening day
A16 Building a garden path
A26 Digging a border
B4.8 Removing weeds and grass

Instructions for clearing weeds and grass

a Digging to remove weeds and weak/patchy grass

- 1** Pull plants out of the soil with as much root as possible, loosening the soil first with a fork or trowel if needed. Collect plants in a bucket or wheelbarrow.
For 'perennial' weeds with deep roots, you may not be able to get the full length of the root out, but do your best! The technique becomes easier with practice.
- 2** Turn the soil over again, removing all visible weed roots. This may take some time, but is well worth it. Any remaining perennial weed roots will quickly re-grow from even a small segment.
Move along the trench, repeating the process until all the roots are removed. Be careful not to miss any plants accidentally covered by soil disturbed by the digging.



Notes

- This is strenuous work so take regular breaks and don't rush
- Using a light-excluding mulch over the soil for a few weeks before you start will make life easier (see below).
- If the weed growth is very matted, roughly dig the ground over with a sharp spade and then dig again with fork two weeks later.
- Don't be tempted to use a mechanical powered 'cultivator' to remove weeds. The machine's blades will chop up the perennial weed roots into many more small segments than digging and each bit is likely to re-grow.
- Cut brambles to the ground before digging out as much root as possible.

Top tip



What to do with weeds

- You can safely compost annual weeds (with small roots) and the leafy part of perennials (see B5.7)
- Don't compost perennial roots as they may survive and grow when compost is used. Instead put moist roots in an old compost bag for 12 months to rot down before composting
- Don't compost seed heads either, as the seeds will survive and germinate when compost is used. Instead dispose of in municipal waste, a weed bag (above), or in a rough garden patch. Ideally dig out weeds before they produce seed.

b. Applying a light-excluding mulch to kill weeds

- 1 Cut down taller plants by mowing or with shears. Check carefully beforehand for any junk that may be lurking among the weeds



- 2 Lay a light-excluding mulch over the ground eg

- a Opened-out, damp newspaper at least eight sheets deep or opened-out cardboard boxes (removing staples or plastic tape). Cover with organic matter (see Top tip below).



- b Water-permeable woven fabric (available from garden centres) or black plastic. Secure with planks, bricks, or large wire staples. Do not leave plastic down longer than a few months to let air and water into the soil.



- 3 Leave the mulch for at least three-six months at any time of year. If weeds persist, dig over (see above) and/or cover again for up to another 12 months.
- 4 While waiting for weeds to die, plant vigorous vegetables through holes cut in the mulch, such as pumpkins, sweet corn, tomatoes, and broccoli.

Top tip

Organic matter to secure newspaper and cardboard

- Straw or hay, damp grass clippings
- Wet autumn leaves or leafmould (rotted leaves)
- Compost, eg home-made, bought, or green waste from the local authority (use if you especially want to feed the soil beneath)



c Lifting and stacking grass turves

1 Using a sharp spade, slice the grass into narrow strips and then again into square sections. Aim for turves about 15-30cm².



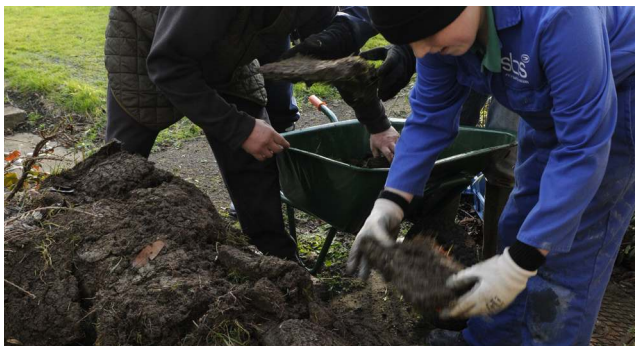
2 Slide the spade under the first turf and, with sharp forward action, slice the grass roots and lift the turf out whole.



3 Work along the strip removing each turf in turn. Cut another strip and repeat until the area is cleared.



4 Stack turves in a heap to rot down and produce a fine soil ('loam'). This is useful for mixing with compost for plants growing in containers (A11).



a Stack turves up-side-down; keep damp



b Cover with black plastic for 6-12 months before using

Notes

- This is strenuous work so take regular breaks and don't rush.
- Regularly clean off soil stuck to the spade.
- Ideally use a spade with a flat blade. This makes it easier to cut a straight line and slide underneath the turf.
- Turves can be buried at the bottom of a digging trench (B5.8) or a tall raised bed (B4.5).