

# OK, you can stop washing those pots

Why Charles Dowding's myth-busting book can save you hours of time spent on pointless chores

*Jane Powers.* Published: 19 October 2014



that have been passed from gardener to gardener.

All over Ireland, gardeners are putting their vegetable patches to bed. One of the tasks that makes us feel particularly wise and experienced is cutting down the spent bean and pea plants, but leaving their feet in the soil. This is because leguminous plants such as these have little nodules on their roots that contain nitrogen. So, the idea is that you leave the roots in place and the soil gets a free boost of fertiliser. Hurrah.

Or, at least, it would be something to celebrate, if it were true. Sadly, it isn't. Yes, those little nodules do "fix" nitrogen from the air and feed it to the plant, but by the time the plant has flowered and reached maturity, it has used up almost all the nitrogen. Only 3% of the original amount remains in the nodules, so it's pointless leaving the roots in the ground.

This is just one of the busted myths that I have been reading about in Charles Dowding's slim but fascinating volume: *Gardening Myths and Misconceptions* (Green Books, €15.11, kennys.ie).

Dowding, who lives in Somerset, will be familiar to gardeners as a proponent of the "no-dig" system and the author of several excellent books on vegetable growing. He is an ardent questioner of the strictures and tenets

One such piece of received wisdom, he tells me, came from his mother, who showed him how to put a layer of crocks (broken pot shards) over the holes in pots to improve drainage – something that gardeners have been doing for decades.

“It looked sensible, but then once, when tipping out the compost to reuse a pot, I noticed how much the volume of compost had been lessened by the pottery and decided to fill pots with compost only, just to see,” Dowding says.

His plants grew beautifully, proving that the crocks were superfluous. There have since been studies showing that drainage can be impeded when there is a layer of different-density ingredients at the bottom of containers.

So, gardeners, if you’ve been carefully layering shards into the bases of your containers, it’s time to stop.

If you’ve also been meticulously washing out your seed trays and pots between uses, you should also put an end to that practice. Diseases associated with propagating plants, writes Dowding, do not originate in the containers or materials used, but arise because of weather or errors.

Damping-off (a fungal disease of seedlings) occurs in humid conditions when the infant leaves are too close, watered too often or sown too early. Just imagine all the water and time you can now save by not washing your seed containers. “I have successfully reused module trays more than 100 times, without any cleaning at all,” Dowding says.

Many of the traditional operations that modern gardeners still religiously carry out are routines that have their origins in the very large properties of the gentry, he says. In winter, when the growing season was finished, staff had to be occupied.

Pot-washing, winter-digging and the sterilising of greenhouses kept the gardeners out of trouble, even if the tasks didn’t bring any benefit. “Many of the myths I cover involve extra time and effort, so understanding why they are not necessary things to do is liberating,” he says.

Indeed it is. In the couple of hours that it took me to read all 91 pages, I reckon I’ve potentially won back loads of time in the future. I’ve also been saved a lot of worry. Let’s take late blight of potatoes and tomatoes, for example.

The common belief is that the dreaded *Phytophthora infestans* is so pernicious that the leaves, stems and tubers of infected plants must not be put on the compost heap. Even the Royal Horticultural Society cautions that infected material should be buried deeply, consigned to the green waste collection or, ideally, burned.

Nonsense, counters Dowding. He says blight requires living plant tissue to overwinter, and the only way it can do so is in tubers. So much material is added to the compost heap in summer and autumn, however, that the pathogens do not survive when blighted matter is decomposing.

Late blight can develop only in specific meteorological conditions, and there are millions of spores floating on the breeze waiting to land on plants during those times. Keeping the leaves of susceptible plants dry is the only solution, he advises.

Other previously forbidden materials that are safe to compost are rhubarb leaves and the roots of perennial weeds. The latter just need to be put at the centre of the pile, and thus kept in darkness until they exhaust themselves.



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