

GARDENING

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

Whenever you start with ground under spruce trees, the soil is acidic. I have a procedure that I use that seems to work.

When I clear a little plot I remove all the superficial moss, and leave just what little layer of black topsoil there is. Then I will dump my urine on that. I have a plastic jar with little holes to act as a sprinkler.

Then I bring up loads of grass from the area down by the beaver dam. I gather it early in the season, about the time it's ripening. I spread it out on the bare soil along with some ashes and urine and grass, to build up a sort of compost.

Pretty quick you've got grass growing there. If you've got a good sod built up with that grass, it seems to sweeten the soil.

The urine would provide nitrogen, and the ashes contain a lot of potassium.¹

The next step is to make it into a garden. I'll spade up an area and pile it up into beds, with a space of about 16" between beds. The beds are such that I can reach at least halfway across and work there.

Then I'll cut grass around the dog yard and wherever, and put that in the trenches between the beds. I'll also gather leaves and whatever there is that will decay rather rapidly. That way when I kneel in the trenches, it's not so dirty.

After a couple of years, that all turns into compost too. It doesn't work real fast, being down in the ground where it's cool, but little by little it rots. I add a little more year by year, and eventually I'll take it out of the ditches, pile it on the beds, and dig it in as fertilizer.

Of course I have some dog fertilizer. I don't have a big team of dogs, but I have a pretty good supply of urine, just from my own self.

Do you use the dog manure in the garden?

I compost it.

How?

My composting is quite informal. I'll have a pile of kitchen waste, grass, leaves, and anything of that sort. After the growing season is over, I'll also have some plant stuff off the garden, with a little dog manure and some urine mixed in. I'll turn it a couple of times during the summer with a fork. That's all I do to it.

After that pile is pretty well decayed, I'll spread it on the bed and chop it in. Even if it's not completely composted in the period of one summer, that finishes it off.

Very often, especially when I start a new garden, I get topsoil and leaves from under the willows. That seems to have what I need for growing most of my vegetables.

What else can you tell me about your gardening?

I have an army surplus spade—a trenching tool, actually. I'm just using the blade, not the pick part of it.



US Vietnam Era 1966 dated Ames E-Tool w/Pick
entrenching shovel USMC ARMY ARVN
Image: Ebay

I dug up a young birch tree, roots and all, and fastened that spade blade onto one of the major roots that came out at an appropriate angle. It's like a hoe or an adze, but it cuts a little deeper.

That's the main tool I use for my gardening. If you pull it just right, it'll break the soil and lay it over a little bit. If you've got roots growing in there, that would be tough to cut with an ordinary spade. More importantly for me, I can't stand up and work a spade. When I work my garden I sit on a six gallon plastic bucket with the lid on. I chop the soil that I can reach, and then move the bucket back and chop some more.

How do you sharpen that tool?

I file the inside edge. Being lazy, I keep it pretty sharp.

Most people know a little about gardening, and if they don't, there are plenty of books on it. A fellow could write quite extensively about gardening, but I'm one of those people who try to avoid a lot of extra work.

So if fireweed and grass and other things grow along the edge of my bed without interfering in them, I figure that those plants are reaching down deeper than some of the garden produce. When I cut them off or spade them under, they have brought up quite a bit of minerals and stored them in their stalks and roots, and that would add to the fertility of the soil.

When I was quite young, my father taught me that when we started a garden, we always spaded two spades deep. You throw a spadeful of dirt out ahead so you have a little mound. You take two spades off like that and then step back, take another spade depth, turn it over, and throw it up against that bank you've got started there. You keep working it that way.

Minerals in the soil get used up rather rapidly, unless you replace them. By digging down a little deeper, you go below the natural sod, which has used a lot of the minerals in the

soil right near the top. By bringing up the deeper soil and working it in toward the top, you have some virgin soil with minerals in it, rather than just what's right on the surface.

What are your most successful crops?

Chickweed and lamb's quarter. I don't plant them in rows--I just sow them on the soil and rake the soil a little bit with a board to cover up the seed. I eat a lot of the chickweed and some of the lamb's quarter when they're fresh. It comes up way too thick, so I thin it out. I eat the thinnings for a salad, or if it's too much, I spread it out on racks and dry it up for winter use.



Drying racks on the garden fence. Image: ?

As the plants get bigger, they are spaced far enough apart. I keep nipping the leaves off at the tips, and eat them as salad all summer. Sometimes during the summer I pick the leaves and boil them along with other stuff, or cut them up and eat them like a salad.

When I harvest, I wait until the seed is ripe. Then I stick the plants in a paper bag, shake them around to get most of the seed off, and put the rest of the plant on the compost. During the winter I grind up the seed, or just cook it.

This is not a joke, right? Those two are usually considered weeds.

That's right. Pigweed and lamb's quarter are somewhat alike, but pigweed won't reproduce itself up there in my climate. The lamb's quarter will.

Anore and I also imported lamb's quarter to Ambler and got it started in our gardens, so we could eat it.

I didn't import it on purpose. I had some alfalfa seeds for sprouting. It had a generous admixture of both lamb's quarter and pigweed. The first year I got a good crop of pigweed, but the season was too short to produce new seed. The lamb's quarter did very well.

Will these colonize other parts of your garden?

Of course—especially chickweed. If they're not too much a nuisance, I just let them grow.

Will they grow in inferior soil and still produce a nutritious plant?

I work at building up my soil, and it's pretty good, so I suspect they are nutritious. Both of them are known for good nutrition. Lambs quarter was raised in Europe as a farm crop, I suspect both for the leaves and the seeds.

Did you grow any conventional garden things?

I'm not much of a gardener. I could start plants like cabbage and cauliflower indoors, harden them off, and set them out later, but it doesn't seem like it's worth it. Potatoes the same way.

I have grown potatoes, but we usually have an early frost in August. That's the time when the tubers are growing fast. If you're not there to catch it, they don't do so well after that, even if they do survive, so I had to have a cover.

I put stakes in the garden every so often, and just placed a plastic over them. If the plastic touches the plants, the frost will go right through it. If it's up above the plants, it will trap enough heat that it won't harm the garden. But that's a nuisance too, and you can't always know when it's going to happen.

I've also grown lettuce, but mostly I just don't want to fool with it. Instead, I get willow leaves, sourdock, and one other plant that grows around the beaver house and along the lake. I grow some of that one in my garden too. I'll think of the name after a while.

I have a small greenhouse that was a bit like a pyramid, about 4' square. I don't remember what the frame was for originally, but anyway I covered it and tried it to see what difference it would make. It made a lot of difference. The plants that were under it made a lot more progress than the plants that were out in the open.

I've done a little experimenting using magnetized water. It does seem to make a difference.

Any more on gardening?

I could say more. When I plant, I never bother with a string and a couple of stakes—I just have a board, usually 1" lumber, about 6' long. When I want to plant a row, I'll smooth the surface a little bit, push the edge of the board into the ground a little ways, and lay my seed in that trough. Then I use the same board to pull the soil over it and tamp it down a little bit so that the seeds are in fairly tight soil and get moisture right away. I'll plant the length of the board, then slide it along and do it again until I have the row as long as I want it.

To deal with mice, I space some tin cans around the garden, with some water and oil in them. The mice jump in and drown.

The other thing is rabbits. I drive stakes into the ground about 2-1/2' apart. Then I braid small, limber saplings back and forth between the stakes. Up at the top I have a frame that holds the posts more or less together.

Do you ever set snares for those rabbits?

Yes. I catch quite a few of them when they're thick. I have a rabbit skin blanket that I made.

How do you dispose of mice?

I don't like to have the dogs eat them, so I throw them in the stove.

I'd be inclined to put them into the soil, for the nitrogen, phosphorus, calcium and whatnot.

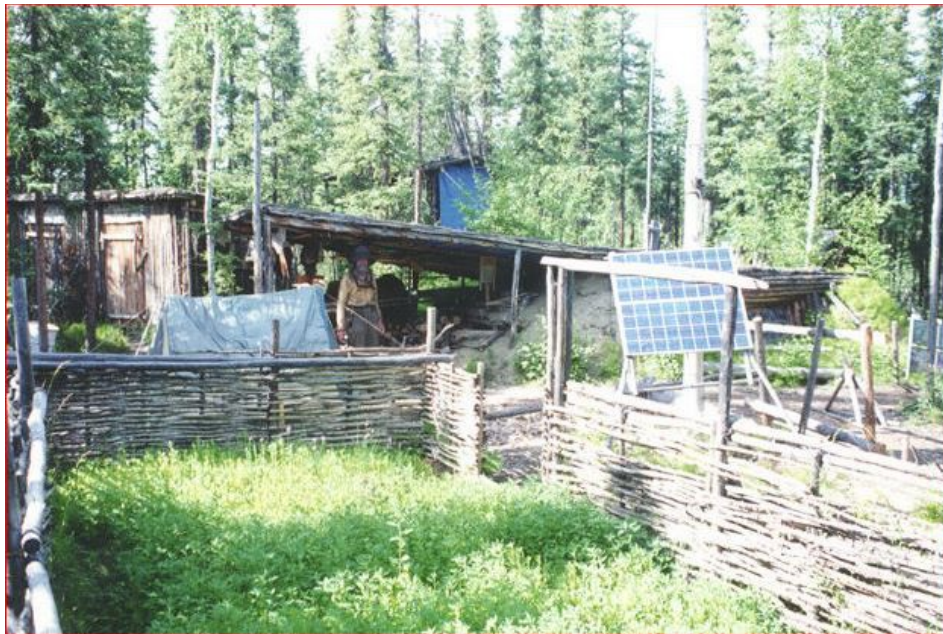
If I could keep the dogs out of the garden, that would be alright.

Are birds a bother?

When I first broadcast the seed, late in the fall, just shortly before snowfall, there will be some that doesn't get buried as I rake the surface back and forth. The birds will eat a certain amount. Of course there are a few birds in the garden in the summer too, but they don't bother anything enough to cause any great loss.

What about moose?

I haven't had much trouble with them. I did have a moose wade across my garden once or twice, but I have that fence. It's low, but it does keep the puppies and the rabbits out.



Olive behind his garden. Image: ?

I once had a bear between the house and the dog yard. He was kind of trapped because of the way I have things arranged. He didn't want to leave, but Pack had a way with things like that. He weighed 65 pounds, and had long legs. He'd run around the bear in a circle, just out of the reach. Of course the bear didn't want the dog to get behind him, so he went around and around. Finally he decided that can't go on forever, and would make a bolt for him. A few times he jumped over that fence into the garden and out the other side in his eagerness to get out of there.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.