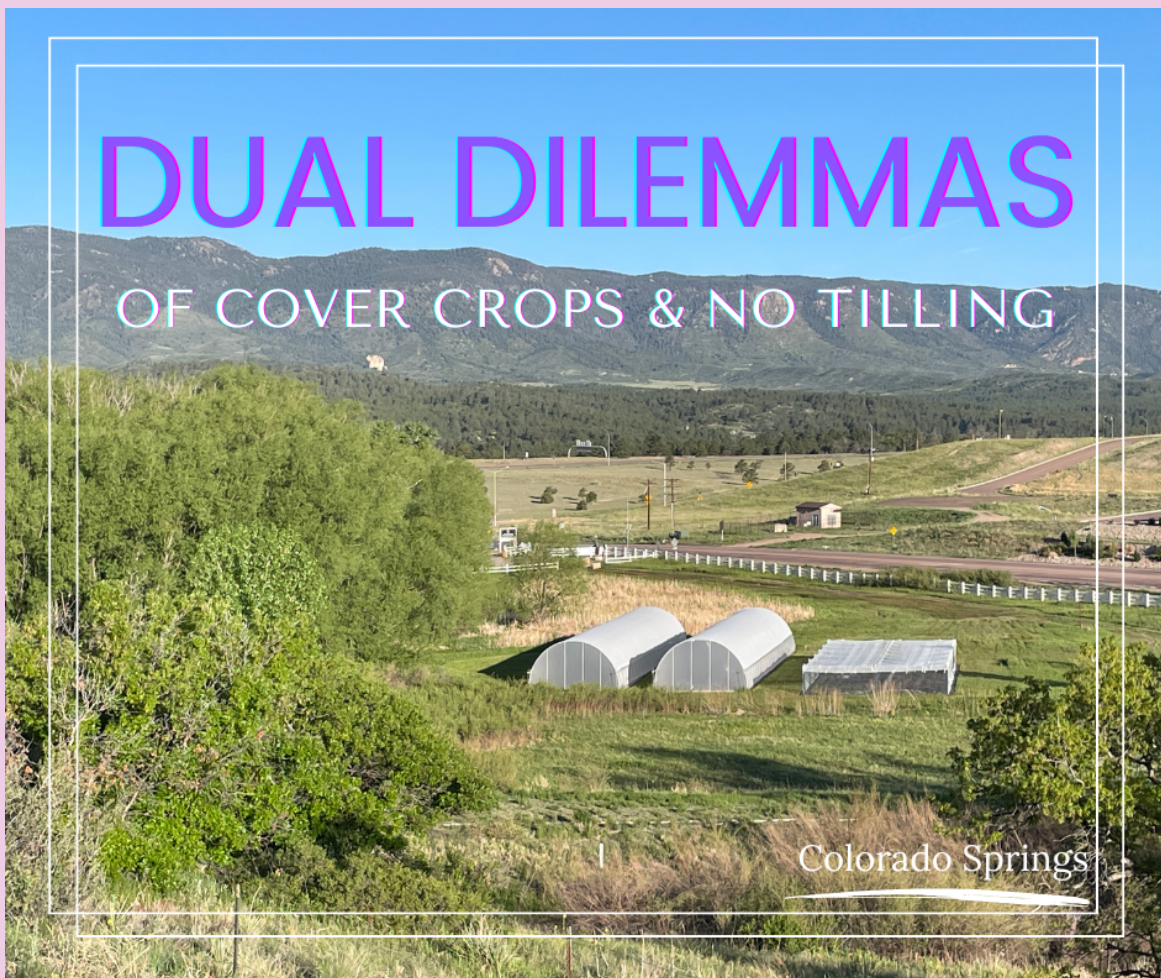




By Dianne Reitan

As I trudge through the Great Dahlia Dig and process over 900 crowns in early November, I'm researching and debating the pros and cons of implementing no-tilling and cover crops at my commercial dahlia farm. I'm running across these two subjects a lot in my gardening and dahlia resources.

With my dahlia farm being 7,000 feet above sea level in Colorado Springs, the Rocky Mountains Region (pictured above), I've asked numerous garden experts how to realistically implement a no-till garden in our semi-arid climate. Every single one of them nod their heads when I explain that with our hard and rocky soil, not tilling our grounds means not being able to work with the land so we can plant vegetables and flowers.

Even my organic community garden that produces some of the best tomatoes, squash and lettuce harvests, till all 104 full-size plots (20' x 40') twice a year in the fall and spring. With my hubby Dave pickling more than 100 jars of cucumbers and freezing more bags of tomatoes than our freezer can hold for his winter project of making a years supply of spaghetti sauce, it seems to us that our plot creates a bumper crop just fine with the tilled soil.



Dianne with Ferncliff Copper, one of the most popular dahlia flowers sold this summer.

And so it was at the dahlia farm. For two years, we have tilled the ground after we remove all of the dahlia tubers, stakes, tomato cages and weed fabric. Then before the winter snow comes, we bring in barley straw and compost just like we were taught to do at our community garden. Some of our tubers were 'laggards' perhaps because our soil was still too hard and dry but we still had hundreds and hundreds of dahlia plants that produced more gorgeous blooms than I originally planned. Bohemian Spartacus, Ferncliff Copper and Black Satin all reached over

six feet tall! It sure didn't seem to us that tilling the soil was a bad thing. You can view a short video I created called [Black Gold](#) showing my community garden and dahlia farm.

While Dave and I have seen success in our gardens, I still think about the no-till garden as this method focuses on disturbing the soil as little as possible and keeping the soil covered and planted as much as possible. If we didn't till, we would not kill our valuable earthworms, bring weed seeds to the surface to germinate or contribute to compaction where we plant our vegetables and dahlias. But even the gardeners that have been at the community garden for decades say, they would not be able to dig one hole if their plot wasn't tilled due to the high and dry climate in Colorado Springs. Sigh, okay. These seasoned gardeners grow more vegetables than they themselves can eat and the animals at the world-renowned Cheyenne Mountain Zoo benefit from the donated produce so they must be doing something right.

Then I contemplate implementing a cover crop, planting seeds as I dig up my tubers because the ground really does prefer to be covered. Ah, here is the answer to why weeds are almost everywhere! But planting a cover crop requires irrigation and even with us having permanent wobbler irrigation set-up rather than drip irrigation inside our high tunnels, the water line from the well to the dahlia farm is shut off when temps start dipping near freezing levels. So, we have no water at the farm from November thru April and no way to water a cover crop. Again, sigh.



Cafe au Lait Dahlia

And here is when I take another deep breath and look at this wonderful photo of a Cafe au Lait I grew last month. My dahlia is pictured here with the very first photo I ever saw of a dahlia in a Martha Stewart magazine back in spring 2021. We were still dealing with Covid, many of us gardening more than ever, and I

embarked on a love affair that would lead me to a new avocation and ultimately a new vocation. I never would have dreamed that this magazine photo and my humble attempt to grow eight dahlia plants would take me on a journey to share my love of this flower with hundreds of other people. I may not have all the answers and not be able to do everything 'just right', but I'm immersed in joy and making other people happy with the splendor of the flower.

After the tubers are put to bed, I'll stare at this photo over the holidays and contemplate how far we have come in four years and how much we have learned. I don't need to implement every suggestion or tip I read. I can't. Where I live has limitations, however I have proven that dahlias can be enjoyed for several months even in a less-than-ideal climate and soil conditions. Perhaps the auger drill is a way we could eliminate one of the tills per year as this tool allows the drilling of the hole itself. This would result in less soil disruption. Also through yearly soil augmentation, the need for annual tilling may become less needed. I will continue to be an avid reader building my gardening knowledge as I go into my fifth year of growing my beloved dahlias.

**Dahlia Talk Co-Authors
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