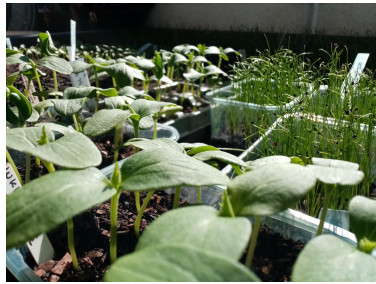


Tombreck Market Garden

Newsletter #2 March 2023

March has shot by and it's beginning to feel like Spring, although much later than we are used to. It has been nice to snack on the first wild greens of the year: lots of wild garlic, soups and stews with nettles & ground elder, and delicate sweet cicely infusions all bring a welcome freshness and sense of being 'cleansed' after a long winter. Excitingly, we have our first seedlings beginning to emerge, a mix of broad beans, leeks, celeriac and tomatoes & cucumbers - which should have a polytunnel to go into if all goes to plan!



It has also been time to break the first ground. Oddly neither of us have actually done this before, at least not on this kind of middling scale. The size of the planned glowing plots is too small to plough - if we even had a tractor - but too large to do by hand, so we're trying a few different methods to see what works best. Attempt #1 was to cover the first plot with silage tarp, and this has worked quite well to kill off the grass in a little over a month (ideally it would be on through the winter). Attempt #2 was to use our rotovator to create a bed in the second plot, tilling directly into the turf, which took lots of passes for rather unsatisfactory results. It worked better on a portion of the covered area but was still hard going.

Attempt #3 gave the best instant result, an experiment on the second plot with the so-called 'lazy bed' for a row of potatoes. This is an old technique which was common among subsistence farmers in the Highlands and Ireland, well suited to rocky or boggy soils where you couldn't pull a plough. Basically you cut & flip the turf into the middle of the bed from both sides, keeping the 'hinge' intact to maintain the integrity of the sides. Putting compost under where the spuds will go, you then dig a trench on both sides and use the spoil to build up the middle of the bed and rake it into a gentle curved profile. The potatoes then get planted to the depth of the original soil level, poking a hole through the upside down turf. The final effect is that of a high raised bed with drainage channels either side. We'll see how it goes, but I can say that 'lazy' isn't the right adjective, given the amount of soil you have to shift with a spade! Probably not a solution for the whole field... One day I'd like to try using a 'cas chrom' (literally 'crooked foot') which uses a long, curved handle, a step on one side and angled iron blade to cut and lever up the sods without having to bend over so much.



Source: 'Wanderings in the Western Highlands and Islands' - M.E.M. Donaldson, 1921

Otherwise, there has been some rather more... mechanised work being done to the western end of the field, with large diggers putting in drainage pipes and a track by the entrance and around to the Eastern side. A contrast to the somewhat low-tech approach we favour, but an important job to get done and it allows us to start planning what infrastructure we might build there in the future.