

Reclaiming wasteland.

One can 'recondition' a piece of poor ground, in 1649 two thirds of England was still 'the waste', common land and the Diggers had a vision of manuring and digging it to free the common man from servitude, they were soon disabused of that idea. In the 1700's and 1800's at the 'big house' a team of labourers might be employed to dig out poor ground four feet deep, put in drainage ditches, 'improve' the soil with quantities of lime and cart loads of manure and then shovel it all back. It does work, it also is work; a lot of it.

The alternative to work is time. I had the use of a piece of ground that was covered in pernicious, well established weeds, such as couch grass and thistle. I cut them down in late summer when they were at their height and covered the lot with old carpet I had saved, plastic is more conventional, but is not to be found free in skips. The following spring I cut slits and inserted seed potatoes. The potato plants grew through the slits, there was the odd weed that made it alongside them, but potatoes are pretty vigorous and I am pretty merciless.

When the potatoes had died down most of the carpet had rotted to the point I was able to pull it to pieces, there was some that had an artificial fibre running through it, that was a pain, but I pulled it out with a rake. The chopped down weeds and their smothered seedlings had provided a layer of damp humus into which the potato roots had grown horizontally, the potatoes themselves were on or near the surface. Not a big crop, but not bad for a piece of what had been rubbish ground, a week or so after cropping I went over the ground again, removed any surviving weeds, and incorporated the rotting carpet and humus into the top two or three inches, this was relatively easy as the damp top layer had softened the ground. I then put farm yard manure in regular heaps across it and left it in the summer sun for a while before spreading it out. Cow manure can be a bit sticky and this gave it a chance to dry out a bit, and for remaining weed seeds to sprout before I pulled it across them with my hoe and smothered them.

I don't remember what I grew next, but by this time the ground had been transformed from horrendous to horticultural, I expect it was something that I could plant up in the Autumn, like broad beans, which would add a bit more nitrogen, or garlic to discourage pests.