How to Dig Your Back Garden

Key Stage 2-3

This booklet will explain how to dig a test pit somewhere in your garden. It doesn't have to be your back garden, it could be on your front lawn but wherever it is you should make sure you have permission to dig, even if the land belongs to your mum and dad.

The test pit you are going to dig is something archaeologists use to check if there is any archaeology hidden in the ground. It is not meant to uncover a whole building although if you are really lucky you might find a little bit of one.

The most likely things you will find are not buildings but the bits and pieces people have thrown away over the years. These will be things such as bone, pottery, metal, glass and plastic.
You must keep all these things as they are important clues that will help to tell us what people were doing in the past.
If you are not sure if you should keep something then KEEP IT. It can always be thrown away later.

You will need

A spade, a fork, a small trowel, some string, 4 large nails or tent pegs, a bucket, some polythene sheet, a bowl or tray for your finds, an old toothbrush or nail brush, gloves to protect your hands and, if you have one, a sieve.

What to do

Firstly you need to decide where to dig. **Remember** that you must have permission to dig before you start. Try to find a space away from trees or bushes because you will spend most of your time getting cross with all the roots that you find.

Next you need to mark out a square with some nails and string. The sides should all be 1 metre long and the corners should be right angles.

The next thing is to remove any turf. You will need a spade for this. Put the spade just inside the string and gradually work along each side cutting the turf as you go. When you have cut the turf all the way round begin cutting the middle into a series of squares like a chessboard. Each turf should be about 25 centimetres square.

Once you have done this slide the spade under a piece of turf and gently lift it out. Carry on until all your turfs are lifted.

When you stack the turf make sure you put it well out of the way so that you don't fall over it. You can make a small wall with the turf. Start by putting the first layer grass side down, then the second layer grass side up and so on.

You are now ready to start digging

1. First, using the side of the trowel, scrape clean the bottom of your test pit. Carefully check the soil you are scraping off for any finds such as pottery, brick or bone. Make sure the sides of your pit are vertical (straight up and down) and nice and smooth.

2. You can put the earth on a sheet of polythene once you have checked it for finds.

3. Now loosen the next 10cms of soil in your pit using your fork.

4. If you have a sieve, start putting the loose soil into your bucket and then sieving it onto your polythene. If you don't have a sieve then carefully check each bucket load of soil and keep anything you find.

5. Now scrape clean the bottom and sides of your pit just as you did before and then take off the next 10cms of soil and so on.

How do I know when to stop?

1. If you hit anything hard like a wall or a floor then stop! The archaeologists will look at what you have found and photograph it.
2. If you don't find any walls or floors then take your test pit to a depth of about 60-70 centimetres

Once you have done all this you can gather up your finds and get them ready for washing.

Cleaning your finds

1. All your finds can be brushed clean to start with. Do this quite carefully especially if the finds are delicate.
2. If you are not sure then leave them dirty. It is probably safer not to clean any pieces of glass at all.
3. Once your things are brushed clean use a bowl of clean water (no washing up liquid or soap) and a toothbrush.
4. Wash each piece carefully but don't scrub too hard.
5. When clean lay your pieces on some newspaper to dry for a day.

Important- Some old pottery can be very soft and even have messages written on it so before you wash any pottery check this and don't wash it otherwise you might destroy some vital evidence.

What if I want to dig more than one test square?

This is fine as long as you have got the muscles for it!

But Remember

If you are putting another pit in the same garden, find a spot away from your first one. There are some good reasons for this.

- Firstly if you didn't find much in your first pit then you might get lucky looking somewhere else.
- Secondly if you did find a lot in your first pit it might mean that you have found something important. If you dig another pit you might be destroying important evidence.

If you dig more than one pit you must keep your finds from each pit in different bags with a label to tell you which bag is which. **This is really important!**
If you don't do this we won't know where your finds have come from and we have lost the evidence forever.

What to do with your finds.

Take them in to school and compare what you have found with others in your class.
Think about what the evidence is telling you about the people who threw it away. What did they eat? Were there any children in the family? Are there clues about what work went on?

If you have lots of interesting things your teacher will probably want to arrange for an archaeologist to see them.

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