

Hugelkultur Gardening

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A hugelkultur is a raised mound, which is a combined compost heap and garden bed. I have heard that it had its origins in Scandinavia, though I have also read that it is originally a German design. However, there is evidence that it has been practised in Northern Europe for many hundreds of years. The idea of hugelkultur farming was suggested by Rudolph Steiner, founder of the Biodynamic farming movement, and has also been promoted by Permaculture designers.

One benefit of a hugelkultur is that it is a design that breaks down very slowly, even over two to three years or more, and retains moisture and nutrients in soil and therefore it is particularly beneficial where the soil is poor, or sandy. Additionally, as wood is buried in the ground rather than being burnt, it provides a way to lock carbon in the soil rather than sending it up into the atmosphere. Furthermore, the warmth generated by a hugelkultur can be beneficial in colder climates in extending the potential growing season.

How to Build One.

In terms of position in the garden, it is beneficial to orient one long side towards the sun. This side will create a sun trap and excellent growing surface for plants like salads and spinach. The shadier side can be planted with those crops which will grow higher. It is worth thinking about the orientation of the mound before making it.

To make it follow these steps:

1. Remove the top soil and/or grass and lay the clods carefully to one side. There is no limit to the length, but a width of no more than four feet is good as one wants to be able to comfortably reach into the middle part of the mound after it is build.
2. Dig a ditch about a foot deep and a foot to 18inches wide along the length of the proposed mound and fill the ditch with logs (medium size logs is good, and they can be a mix of fresh logs and well rotted logs). Give the logs a good wetting.
3. Cover the logs with sticks to form the base of the mound. Cover the sticks with leaves and grass and wet again (wet at every stage, so that the mounds is moist.)
4. Lay the original earth clods grass side down on the sticks, leaving air gaps between the clods.
5. Continue to build up with layers of 'brown stuff' and 'green stuff'. Brown stuff can include autumn leaves, dried plant materials, old sacking, ripped up cardboard boxes (wet them), shredded paper etc. Green stuff includes fresh cut grass, fresh green leaves, kitchen food waste, animal manures. You do not need all these items, but at least some brown and some green materials, in a rough proportion of 60% brown to 40% green. The green, which should be rich in nitrogen, will be broken down by bacteria and will act to heat up the pile. The brown and the stick and logs will be more gradually broken down by beneficial fungals, such as mychorrhizal fungals. Remember to keep wetting the heap

as you build it – the wetness should be about 50%, which means that if you squeeze it with your fist just a little brown liquid will come out – too wet and the heap can become anaerobic and grow less beneficial anaerobic bacteria, too dry and the heap will not compost well.

6. Cover the whole mound with between 2 and 4 inches of good growing soil, or whatever soil is handy. Finally cover the soil with a layer of wet hay (this hay will protect the top layer of soil from drying out.) If the hay is moist it will adhere to the soil better and not blow away.

7. You can plant directly in the mound, however if you are not in a hurry it is a good idea to sow a thick layer of green manure (white clover is ideal) which will help to bind the heap together with its roots. After a few months you can open up pockets within the clover and sow vegetable seeds onto the sides and top of the hugel. Our mound was partially sown immediately with vegetable seeds (on the sunny side) and partially sown with white clover (on the shadier side)

It is a big effort to made a hugel, but once it is made it provides a very low maintenance raised bed that should be able to keep on giving healthy vegetables for several years without major additives or maintenance.

