

Gardening

Beds gain some ground over conventional rows

By Pat Leuchtman
leisure Columnist

Everybody knows that vegetables grow in rows and flowers grow in beds, right? Not necessarily. Vegetables grown in beds or wide rows have advantages over those grown in rows. Think about it. What does a plant need to thrive? Sun. Water. Food. Now a plant gathers water and food through its roots; in order to do their work most efficiently another vital requirement is loose soil so the roots can penetrate and develop easily.

In a conventional row-planted garden, the row is bordered on either side with a packed down path to give the gardener access for cultivating and harvesting. Unfortunately, that path restricts the growth of the roots and this ultimately reflects in the growth and the health of the plant itself.

Last summer, while traveling in Maine, we had a chance to stop and visit Helen and Scott Nearing who are famous for their efforts at self-sufficient living and their books, *Living the Good Life* and *Continuing the Good Life*. We were given a tour of their walled-in garden and were shown the vegetable beds. They explained they now almost totally use beds.

This was said with emphasis and a knowing look, but I totally missed the significance of what they were saying until I was reading this winter and came across warnings about soil compaction.

Actually, I have always used what might be termed beds or wide rows because I've never felt I had enough garden space to waste on unnecessary paths.



My first garden in Greenfield was very tiny, planted in a small side yard, with my tomatoes, basil and nasturtiums making a tasteful and handsome (I thought) foundation planting in front of the house. There was one path through the center of the garden and by working there and around the edges I could reach every plant. Although it wasn't my purpose, I avoided compacting my soil and the garden was amazingly productive.

In Maine my garden was considerably larger, but still not big enough to waste space on more

paths than were absolutely necessary. Again I planted at least three rows of peas or lettuce or potatoes or whatever, side-by-side, before I could bear to put in a path.

Maximum production was my main goal, but besides this I kept the soil from packing down and interfering with root growth. Also, the growing plant leaves acted as a kind of living mulch, keeping the soil surface from drying out as fast as it would in a row and it made so much shade that weed growth was kept down.

If you are like me, spring can get

pretty hectic and there is no time to think about doing something new. But July is slower and it is a good time for a little experimenting. If you are putting in a second planting, consider using beds instead of rows.

In preparing the bed, be sure to fertilize well, especially if you have already brought in one crop from that space. Dig in compost, rock phosphate and lime if your soil is too acid. (A soil test will tell you exactly what nutrients you need in what amounts.)

Some people prefer to use commercial fertilizers, but remember it is the organic matter in the soil that gives it its tilth, and makes it friable, loose and crumbly. This is the condition you are trying to develop and maintain when planting in beds.

When the bed is prepared, be sure not to step on it, stay on the paths. Plant your seeds according to package directions, only ignoring the distance recommended between rows. If spinach can be planted six inches apart going east and west, they can also be six inches apart going north and south.

Cultivate and weed your bed while your seedlings are small. Once the vegetables are larger you will not have much trouble with weeds and this is only one of the advantages of this method. □

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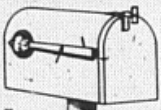
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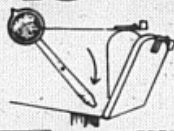
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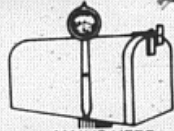
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