

HOME & GARDEN



Recorder Photo by Bob Laramie

Market opens

Mrs. John Gardner of Buckland, left, examines vegetable plants being held by Sandra Schoffstall of the Shoestring Farm in Colrain at the opening of the Green-

field Farmers Market last Saturday. The market will be held from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. every Saturday through October in the Courthouse parking lot off of Hope Street.

Wide rows, raised beds: efficient ways to organize vegetable gardens

By PAT LEUCHTMAN
Recorder Columnist

The word garden may conjure up images of vegetables growing in neat, straight rows, but in fact, there are other more efficient ways of organizing a vegetable garden.

Two techniques that have a lot in common are wide row plantings and raised beds. By planting in "beds" rather than rows, both methods make better use of growing space and the thick, close growth of plants helps to hold down weeds and conserve moisture.

The difference between these two methods is that the wide rows are set out on the same level with the garden, and as might be expected, the raised beds rise above the level of the paths.

BETWEEN THE ROWS
Garden preparation is always important no matter how you plant. If you are planning wide rows, prepare your soil as you would ordinarily. Apply fertilizer and lime appropriately depending on your soils needs, till and smooth the soil. Then, instead of stringing twine between two stakes to mark a row, use four stakes and twine to mark out a rectangle. The width will depend on your own inclination and the type of crop you are planting. Personally I prefer beds that are about 3 feet wide because I can reach the middle comfortable from both sides.

After the wide row is marked out, rake it smooth. It is not necessary to make any seed furrows. Broadcast the seed. Spacing will depend on the crop. Bean seeds can be planted 2 or 3 inches apart, but if you are planting a cabbage bed, you will want to plant the seeds or seedling transplants about a foot apart. Then press the seeds into the soil with the back of the hoe or rake. To additionally cover the seeds, use soil taken from the path outside the row.

When the seeds begin to sprout, you may want to do some thinning. In some cases wait until the thinnings are useable. Lettuce thinnings can go into an early salad along with spinach and scallions. Beets can be thinned and used for greens and later baby beets make a delectable side dish. Fingerling carrots are a delicacy known almost solely to gardeners.

There are very few vegetables or herbs that you cannot grow in wide rows: kale, chard, dill, spinach, peas, beets and carrots will all thrive, but you wouldn't want to put vining crops like cucumbers or squash in wide rows or warm weather plants like tomatoes and peppers because they need a lot of sun and warmth.

I am also putting in some raised beds this year and they measure about 3 feet by 20 or 25 feet long, just like my wide row plantings.

One of the chief tenets of raised bed planting is double-digging. If you dig your garden to a single spade depth, you are "single digging" and to double dig a trench must be dug a foot deep. That soil should be removed to the other end of the bed and the soil loosened to the depth of another 12 inches. Then dig another trench putting that soil on top of the loosened soil and so move down the length of the bed. This will give you a planting bed that is loose and friable to a depth of two feet allowing plant roots to develop and penetrate the loose soil.

In my own garden I am taking a shortcut. I limed the garden, spread it with manure and had a neighbor come in to plow, thoroughly turning in the fertilizer and the green manures that I planted last fall. Since the plow digs down to a depth of about 12 inches, I plan my beds and then dig out the paths. By taking the soil from the paths and piling it on top of the beds, I provide a planting bed that is maybe 18 inches deep. Last year I planted beets and carrots in raised beds and they did beautifully even though my soil is very heavy. The roots were straight and well-formed.

I mulch the path to keep down weeds and never, never step on the raised beds (or indeed, the wide rows) because one of the advantages to these techniques is the avoidance of soil compaction.

Plant roots need four things to grow quickly and properly: water, sufficient nutrients, air and a soil that allows the new roots to grow and penetrate easily. Compacted soil prevents all these things from occurring. Water can run off providing the plants with neither moisture nor nutrients, air spaces are eliminated and the hard-packed soil restricts root development.

As in the wide rows, plants in a raised bed are planted closer together than is recommended on most seed packets, and for this reason a raised bed should be very well fertilized. If you have 20 plants in a given area, it is obvious that they will use twice the amount of nutrients used by 10 plants in the same area.

My garden is never big enough and when I see the room taken up by corn or various kinds of squash vines, I really feel that I need to use the rest of my garden space as efficiently as possible. Think of the amount of room that is completely wasted by garden paths. In some gardens the paths account for 50 percent of the garden area. That is something I want to avoid.

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