

THE EDIBLE GARDEN



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GARDEN ACTIVITIES

- Review the gardening year, think about the problems you had – insects, diseases, lack of fertility and take some time to research solutions.
- Send for seed catalogues.
- Use fallen leaves to protect tender plants as the ground freezes or add them to the compost.

DID YOU KNOW?

- A hugel is a mound of logs, branches, leaves, cardboard, newspaper, grass clippings, compost, manure ... covered in soil and planted with vegetables
- The wood in a hugel acts as a water sponge so a large hugel will need little or no irrigation.
- Herbs can be overwintered indoors. Fresh soil and adequate lighting are crucial. Favorites are parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.
- Kale helps lower cholesterol and lowers risk of bladder, ovarian, prostate, breast and colon cancers.

THE EDIBLE GARDEN FOREVER

*Edythe Falconer
Master Gardener of Ottawa Carleton*

I would like to think that my patch will still be fertile a hundred years from now. However that is probably unrealistic. Even a decade is probably a lot to hope for.

Up and down the Andes Mountains of Peru there were garden farms that lasted for centuries. A few are still in use. How did their former occupants keep sloped garden farms productive for such a long time? Scientists speculate first of all that a huge amount of labour was required. These were terraced garden farms and their stone retaining walls needed regular maintenance. Nutritious animal, plant and fish wastes would have regularly contributed to soil fertility.

In fact, animal and plant wastes have been of critical importance to garden/farms in many other parts of the world and for many centuries. The plant/animal link kept the land productive. Examples of this relationship can be found in space shots taken over a drought-ridden part of Africa, in the interaction of buffalo herds on the fertility of prairie soil, and in a recent experiment documented online - for reclaiming parts of the Sahara Desert.

The space shot located a lone green spot. Further investigation at ground level revealed that the green area was completely fenced and that within that area crops flourished – right along with herds of cattle that were rotated from field to field leaving behind a much enriched soil which in turn helped to produce good crops.

When the buffalo herds of the prairies were decimated their redolent contributions no longer enriched the prairie grasses. Subsequently, when land was broken for grain production it soon became necessary to bring in large amounts of commercial fertilizer – an added expense for struggling farmers – unless, of course, they were raising cattle as well as grain!

As a home gardener in 2014 can I maintain the connection between fertility and animal/plant wastes without setting up a

hen house or a cow pasture in my back yard? The answer is certainly – “Yes”. Mind you - hens are not out of the question either. Some cities do allow them. (See *City Farmer* by Lorraine Johnson).

I should also mention the Three Sisters – an indigenous practice that brought together several essential needs for good crops including crop rotation and letting land lie fallow for a period of time. The combination of corn, beans and squash was usually planted on a mound of what we now call compost. When soil finally did begin to tire the Sisters were moved. When the soil had rested it was replanted.

Plants draw heavily from the soil in which they grow. As with banks, if we want to maintain a healthy balance, we need to keep feeding the kitty, in this case the soil. Composting materials from our yards and those of neighbours makes more sense than sending them to city landfill only to turn around and purchase the same thing “in town”. Regular amendments using organic materials vastly improve soil structure and soil fertility.

Since a plant draws heavily from its soil base it makes sense to get as much from that plant as possible. Choosing plants that are edible and also beautiful, will meet two needs for the cost of one. Some fine examples of this combination are fruit trees, berry bushes and many vegetables – especially pole beans. Other needs to consider when choosing plants are shelter, privacy and shade. Some plants meet several needs all at once. One of my favorite all-purpose plants is the Dolgo crab apple.

We can let water run off the roof and into city sewage systems or we can collect it in ordinary or designer barrels. It doesn't take a lot of rain to fill a few barrels and a few barrels can sustain a moderately sized garden through the longer dry spells that we have been experiencing – although not this year! We also collect water in well-structured soil. Good soil holds water when it needs to and lets it go when there is a surplus.

Pollinators provide many benefits to our plants – survival in some cases. Right now they need of our help – particularly bees and butterflies. We can help keep them buzzing and flitting by planting plants they like to visit. That means introducing as much biodiversity into our gardens as possible. This welcome mat of biodiversity should not be hit and miss. The mat needs to be out for the entire growing season. Native plants are particularly appropriate additions and many of them host beneficial insects – welcome guests in our gardens.

Simply put we can recreate the natural order of things in a form that works for us in the 21st Century – both in private and community gardens. No potential growing space should be overlooked - including roofs. When we grow, consume and share our edibles we harvest the rich elements of pure joy.

Edible garden farms are called Victory Gardens in times of war. Their equivalent has seen us through both depression and drought. We may want to consider translating what we do in times of need into a permanent way of life.

See a review of **The City Farmer** by Lorraine Johnson in the August 2014 The Edible Garden Newsletter.

THE HILLS ARE ALIVE

ADVENTURES IN REGENERATIVE GARDENING

Edythe Falconer
Master Gardener of Ottawa Carleton

Sixteen years ago we relocated to four and a half acres of country property in rural Ottawa. Here farmers from earlier times must have truly struggled to grow crops on such poor topsoil. Foundations of an ancient farmhouse were barely discernable beneath a tangle of wild raspberries, stinging nettle and native grapevines. Abandoned fields had been repopulated with white cedar, black buckthorn, hawthorn, scrub pine, white and red pine, oak and unwelcome patches of poison ivy.

However our more recent predecessors had been enthusiastic organic gardeners who had steadily improved the soil closest

to the house. They grew for their own use and that of friends who joined them in a sort of communal garden. We continued this organic tradition until the property became too much for us and we moved back into town.

In town there was much pruning to be done on shrubs and small trees. Cuttings were sorted according to size. Larger poles were saved to support pole beans and tomato vines while the smaller cuts became woodstove kindling, stakes for smaller plants, and the bottom layer of our future Hugel. A salvage operation had begun. Recycle, Reuse and Renew! At the same time the contents of aging compost bins were salvaged to form second and third layers for our greedy Hugel.

To make new beds –“flat Hugel” – layers of dampened newspaper four or five pages thick were put down in the sunny part of the yard. Twigs and smaller branches, as pruned earlier in the year, were cut into short lengths and laid on top of the paper. Next were the coarser contents of the old compost bins, and after that, the mature and finest compost. This layering approach will also work in large containers.

At nearly 80 I look for techniques that are less physically demanding. Sally Jean Cunningham in [Great Garden Companions](#) had introduced me to the European practice of building Hugel, “little hills”. I had constructed some on our “country estate” but more as a way of handling yard waste than for provision of additional growing space. Building an urban version of Hugel would create valuable new soil, preserve aging backs and provide space for more vegetables.

Pumpkins, squash, pole beans, sweet potatoes and three different kinds of Heritage tomatoes took root in Hugel #1. Results ranged from average to excellent. Beans and sweet potatoes were started indoors and tomato plants were purchased at a Heritage Plant Sale – Cara Rich, Black Cherry and Stupice – all very tasty. Paper at the bottom of the Hugel was shovel-pierced to better welcome each new transplant.

Hugel #2 was piled up in the same way as Hugel #1. This location was still partly occupied by a raspberry patch and two varieties of perennial weeds - burdock and cinquefoil - both well established. Down went newspaper followed by woody prunings. Less than perfect soil salvaged from the extension of our patio formed the next layer. This second bed now includes young rhubarb plants rescued from the lawn, a self-seeded white currant bush and the remaining raspberry bushes. Hugel #2 eventually grew some respectable Siberian Blue potatoes and also served as a holding bed.

Soon additional composting space was needed. A friend suggested a quick and inexpensive way to set up accessible mobile composts bins. Stiff small-mesh wire fencing and strong string or twist tie will do the job of producing circular “bins”. Layering is important in the care and feeding of compost bins. Surplus soil from the patio expansion served this purpose well. Our unsprayed apple trees are usually very productive. The freezer is full of apples. We definitely have that “apple a day”. Even so some do end up in the compost heap. Properly layered they don’t create a nutritional imbalance.

I add grass clippings to composters and Hugel. They are better left on the lawn where they can supply up to 50% of the nutrition needed by grass. The leaves that fall on our property and all garden wastes other than grass can go into the mix.



Hugel. Hugelkultur are about building new soil from waste materials on our own property. Eventually they can supply us with all of the fertilizer and compost our yard requires. My yard wastes will not be added to landfill sites. Instead they feed my edibles and ornamentals – augmented from time to time with a bag or two of manure from local gardening centres.

Soil is more valuable than most of us realize. It’s our universal larder. Farmers and gardeners, both urban and rural, can effectively replicate nature’s clever loop of conservation and regeneration – if they so choose.

PS – My latest version of “Hugel” is in the form of 5ft x 5ft x 1ft frames – tidier than wire cages and easier to plant.

Picture EF at Canada Blooms March 2014

BOOK REVIEW

*Dale Odorizzi,
Master Gardener of Lanark*

INSECTS AND GARDENS: IN PURSUIT OF A GARDEN ECOLOGY

Eric Grissell; Timber Press
ISBN-10: 0881927686

Professional entomologist and amateur gardener Eric Grissell suggests that it is time to declare a truce with insects. He introduces the reader to the role of insects in garden ecology. He makes an insightful account of insect biology that is supported by gorgeous photographs by Carl Goodpasture that illustrate the vital interdependence between insects and plants.

This is not a handbook on how to recognize and eliminate insect pests but instead explores the vital role insects play in every garden ecosystem. One of my favourite sections involved the hated earwig. I learned that rather than trying every trick in the book to eliminate these critters, I should embrace them. Grissell explained that the reason most people have problems with earwigs is because they keep their gardens too clean. Earwigs are perfectly happy to help with the decomposition of plant materials in your garden. They are also beneficial in that they eat the eggs of slugs. Many people claim that the earwigs are eating their hosta when in fact it is the slugs that make all the holes in the hosta; the earwigs are looking for slug eggs.

Insects and Gardens is the sort of book that makes a good winter read. Then gardeners can take the time to learn more about insects and their role in garden ecology.

Insects and Gardens: In Pursuit of a Garden Ecology is available from Chapters.

RECIPE

*Susan Bicket,
Master Gardener of Ottawa Carleton*

BRAISED CABBAGE AND CHESTNUTS

¼ cup butter
1 thinly sliced large onion
1 small red cabbage, cored and shredded
1 cup dry white wine
1 tablespoon brown sugar
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
1 bay leaf
500g chestnuts, cooked, peeled & skinned
2 granny smith apples, peeled, cored & sliced

1. Melt the butter in a large saucepan
2. Add the onion and cook until soft
3. Add the cabbage and stir until coated in butter
4. Stir in the wine, brown sugar, salt, pepper and bay leaf
5. Bring to the boil, cover, reduce the heat, simmer until the cabbage is tender (≈15 minutes)
6. Stir in the chestnuts and apples
7. Cover and cook for until most of the liquid has been absorbed (≈20 minutes)
8. Remove the bay leaf and serve

DID YOU KNOW?

You can create a modest little cold cellar in your own back yard. All that is needed is a strong arm to dig a sizeable hole, a barrel or some other sturdy container and a sturdy lid to put on top (translation - "animal and water proof"). The container needs to be buried three-quarters of its height into the ground and need not have a bottom! Excavated soil is used to bank soil to the level of the lid. Vegetables for this kind of storage could include cabbage, carrots, beets, turnips and potatoes. When it gets really cold - straw, hay or bags of leaves provide additional insulation. Ease of access varies according to the amount of snow each winter! This pioneer "refrigerator" was described in Lee's Priceless Recipes - first published in 1895!

Visit the Almonte online community newspaper '[The Millstone](http://millstonenews.com/)' - <http://millstonenews.com/> -for a column by David Hinks of the Ottawa Carleton Master Gardeners; under the Gardening tab

Photographs: Edythe Falconer (Hugelkulture)

The Edible Garden logo was created by Jon Last (jonlast13@rogers.com)

Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton is a member group of Master Gardeners of Ontario Inc., a registered charity with the mission of providing gardening advice to homeowners.

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