

Raised Beds

We are not considering here the question whether you prefer to sleep on the floor or a bit higher but whether we derive any benefits from raising the soil level for our vegetable cultures in garden or field. In the last 50 years organic gardeners gave ever more attention to the idea of raised beds. Basically I would like to differentiate between two concepts:

a) the carefully composed and structured raised bed in the smaller garden and

b) the raised vegetable beds on a farm or large garden by ploughing or discing in such a way that the bed is elevated 4"-6" above the normal ground level.

Let us turn to the raised bed in a garden. It is built with diligence and care: a shallow pit (~10" deep and ~5' wide) is dug out, the earth put aside. A 2' wide layer of shredded twigs and branches is placed in the center and covered (~10") with a mixture of half-rotten garden refuse--leaves, sod, nettles, straw and the dug out soil. Care should be taken to fill out all cavities! Stomp it down! Then a 10" layer of half finished compost, worms and all, is added, followed by a top layer (~10") of mature, finely sifted compost. All of this is packed down well (this time not stomped).

The best time to construct such a raised bed is the fall when these materials are most readily at hand. By spring the whole thing also will have settled a bit.

Given full sun -- absolute necessity for a raised bed-- this earth will warm quicker, allowing you to plant a bit earlier than in the other beds. Careful! Because the contact to the underground is not fully established, such a bed also dries out quicker in the summer.

Why is full sun so important?

By raising the bed above the normal level of a given locality, we enliven and invigorate the earth (Rudolf Steiner, "Agriculture", lecture 4). Growth forces get an additional impulse. That certainly can be a good thing. But in biodynamics we look at the entire situation: the growth forces are only one side of the coin. The other side are the formative forces of the sunlight which endow the plant with firm cells, health, good nutritious and storage qualities, fine aroma.

We can certainly 'force' plants from below, either with high doses of nitrogen (whether organic or inorganic), a lot of water, or in a milder way, by

raising the bed. If to this increased growth force we add yet another factor by having the bed in shade or half-shade, thereby diminishing the necessary complementary and harmonizing formative forces from above, then we cannot expect nutritious and healthy vegetables, only big ones. Probably most of us have observed the reduced quality of the produce due to a wet and cloudy summer or the increased susceptibility to mold and fungus diseases when plants intended for sunshine grow in shady places. The contours of the leaves are not crisp, the cell walls are softer, the taste bland, the storage quality markedly decreased.

Therefore, when we raise the soil level and increase the growth forces, we have to pay special care to balancing this out. How do we accomplish it? As mentioned before, by making sure that such a bed gets the benefit of full sunlight, to begin with. The biodynamic grower will, of course, have an additional help with the silica spray (501) for increased light-quality as well as the equisetum tea as a preventative measure before the mold gets a chance.

Another consideration is certainly the choice of cultures on such a bed. I would not grow vegetables that are relatively weak feeders such as **beets, carrots, onions, peas or beans** on a raised bed in the first year. Strong feeders like **tomatoes, potatoes, squash, leeks, celery or most brassicas** are appropriate for that. In the following year the bed will already level out a bit and with it that strong growth impulse. Then it's right to let the cultures less dependent on nitrogen and 'driving power' have their place there.

Such beds, it must be mentioned, are preferred nesting sites for rodents, especially in the first year. A close eye must be kept on the situation.

Personally I much prefer the second choice: forming, sculpting by plough, disc or just plain old shovel and rake the beds to a slightly higher elevation. The invigorating effects are noticeable but the danger of overdoing it is avoided. The amount of work involved is also considerably less. In the winter time such beds get a thorough frost impulse which enlivens the soil in a special way and in spring these beds warm up and dry off sooner than the level ones, making it possible to work the ground sooner and plant a bit earlier.

In a small garden the limited planting space can certainly be 'stretched' a bit by building up raised beds. In locations where one experiences a lack of growth forces, these can be boosted by raising the soil level. But the other factors mentioned must be considered in order to achieve quality produce: food that will have a truly nourishing effect and not only fill the belly. And that should always be our goal.

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