

BUILDING SOIL

LEARN WHAT YOU HAVE

Soil testing is great but not all have the resources immediately to do this or the home kits to learn soil pH values. A pinch test is good to learn texture & material content by feel. Soil is made up of three materials: sand, silt & clay. The proportion of these three in the soil will determine how the soil will handle water, how much air it will contain & gives us clues about its fertility. A nice balance of the 3 is often referred to as 'loam'.

WORK WITH WHAT YOU GOT & BUILD HUMUS

A good gardener is a conscious & diligent soil builder. Commercial soil amendments & products readily available online are costly, & often limit the self-sufficiency of complex biological activity of living soil. If your new garden plot has scant soil, start collecting woody material, leaves and 'green' matter from around your neighborhood or community. Consider weighing the scale more towards carbon-esque materials (the browns) & less nitrogen-esque sources (the greens). Besides kitchen scraps, sticks, raked brown grass, sawdust, wood chips, rock dust, manures, straw or hay, leaves, green grass clippings, all can be added to the list for building soil (don't forget the water!).

EXPERIMENT & TAKE NOTES

Consider raising the soil beds of your garden, with or without wooden boxes or other supports. Watch how plants grow. Notice the color of their leaves through the growing season, the insects that are attracted to the flowers, the depth of your soil in relation to the size &/or color of your vegetables that are produced.

1. Make Compost. Good compost contains the balance of woody material (sources of carbon), with 'green matter' (rich in nitrogen).
2. Learn about 'Hugel kulture' & consider utilizing this technique to building your garden beds. Investigate how certain plants can benefit each other when planted and spaced together. Plants have companions & plant 'guilds' can be researched to see what can be planted together.
3. Use chop & drop methods of tending the garden beds that keeps organic matter in the bed or garden. In dry climates it is vital to deeply mulch for keeping moisture in the soil and where plants need it most.

A FEW LEARNINGS

FROM A SMALL REMOTE

COMMUNITY GARDEN IN THE

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

"Just grow one small area, and do it well. Then once you have it right, grow more!"

Alan Chadwick

Thoughts about Composting

Composting in nature takes place in three ways:

- It occurs in the form of manures, plant & animal foods digested by the animal & aged outside the animal by the heat of fermentation (Earthworms very good at this! Earthworm castings are 5 X richer in nitrogen than the soil they inhabit!).
- By animal & plant bodies that decay on top of and within the soil in nature & human created compost piles.
- And in the form of hairs, roots & microbial life forms, which remain & decay beneath the surface of the soil after plant harvesting.

Resources

Jeavons, John. **How to Grow More Vegetables: (and fruits, nuts, berries, grains & other crops) than you ever thought possible on less land than you can imagine.** 2012. Ten Speed Press

Appelhof, Mary. **Worms eat my garbage.** illust. Mary Frances Fenton; edited by Diane D. Worden. 1999. Flower Press

<http://www.richsoil.com/hugelkultur/>

BUILDING COMMUNITY

LEARN WHAT YOU HAVE

Know your community; this will form how the garden should be organized. You may not know all of your neighbors who will form the garden, but take time to get a sense of what the shared gardening space will be. Understand people's level of commitment and overall interests & objectives. You can identify where resources should be focused. Know what you want to achieve and be willing to work with each other. Prioritize needs & be willing to work towards goals for garden infrastructure & site development over time.

WORK WITH WHAT YOU GOT

Expectations should be clearly laid out or when starting out try to withhold having any other than your group working that full gardening season together. Every community is different and should not be held to account to some model or ideal of what a community garden should look like, act like or produce. Localizing food takes understanding of each other & the act of growing food. Learn together.

EXPERIMENT & TAKE NOTES

1. Garden tasks can range depending on how the garden may become organized and function. If there a greenhouse & more site development to take care of, people may want to consider hiring a garden manager for certain aspects, but mostly community gardens should maintain simplicity & the volunteer ethic that builds ownership and belonging around the garden for those who participate & the community members who benefit from the food produced. Start small & build only what your group can comfortably maintain.
2. If a community garden is being designed or organized by a community group with little experience gardening in the North or elsewhere, & has refined expertise & skill sets in other land based skills of food harvesting, such as hunting & gathering, a, 'doing it for oneself' attitude that includes experimenting will build real skill in a new area. It also produces a set of shared experiences for a group to coalesce around & becomes a 'learning lab' where curiosity & eager anticipation is being fostered, and people look forward to time in the garden with fellow gardeners.
3. Leading into & out of growing seasons sponsor community gardeners in food preparation, soil health & other workshops & continuing education.

A FEW LEARNINGS

FROM A SMALL REMOTE

COMMUNITY GARDEN IN THE

NORTHWEST TERRITORIES

Materials

Enthusiasm & Collaborative spirit

Commitment to the garden

Flexibility & Adaptability

Adapt Your Learnings from one Growing Season to the next

The next growing season is always a chance to apply learnings from the previous summer. Garden beds can be raised, new ways of completing maintenance tasks can be developed, new equipment salvaged or funds requested. Not everything must be bought. Part of the great fun of the community garden in Lutsel K'e was working with minimal or no budget. We had to be innovative & work with our community. In the process, we included community people who worked with us to achieve certain goals as a part of the garden, & in turn, we made sure they benefited from garden harvests. This in turn promoted the garden space as a 'third space' in the community with picnic tables, a sand box, compost area, flower boxes, garbage can, and a 'sod couch' that was later created for lounging & visiting. In this way, it truly became a community's garden.

Community Gardens localize food & can improve local food security but needs to be inclusive, positive (dare I say fun?), and hopefully educate the wider community about healthy food, by eating it.