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WINTER SOLSTICE

The shortest day of the year heralds the start of a new gardening year.

Once the shortest day is past the day light hours slowly start to extend, little by little, every day until we reach the summer solstice.

Plants respond to the increased daylight hours and even though the weather maybe miserable they do increase their rate of growth.

Gardeners not only see this increased activity in their gardens, but the power of extra light hours works as a trigger to compel us to get out into the garden and do a few things. Thus on the better days instead of looking out the window it is time to get involved in the gardens you have created. In fact it is now time to prepare for the coming spring.

There is ample to do in tidying up existing gardens, trimming hedges and shrubs along with making plans for spring plantings.

With many gardeners now wanting to grow more of their own food crops we will look at this aspect.

The old way which I have done many times in the past was to dig up some lawn area that is in a sunny position and convert it to a vegetable garden. It is a lot of hard work and has in my experience been only of moderate success, unless the fertility of the soil has been very good.

Of course over time the soil condition improves and better results are forthcoming.

There is a superior way which is currently in vogue and that is to construct a raised garden or two.

You will find that there are available wood and plastic type kit sets to make raised gardens from retail outlets.

These are ok to a point but for the same sort of money you can make one yourself that is even better by a long chalk. I made the first one of these a couple of years back and have been very impressed on the results. Great crops straight off, very near weed free and very easy to work.

What you need is 3 sheets of new corrugated iron as used for roofing. The length of the sheets should be 1.8 metres long. Also you need 4 square posts 100x100mm that are the same length as the width of the iron sheets. These posts will be treated with chemicals to preserve them so once cut to the width of the iron you need to give them a couple of coats of acrylic paint, all over, to seal in the chemicals.

The posts are not going to be dug into the ground as your new raised garden will sit on top of the soil or lawn where you wish to place the garden.

One of the 1.8 metre sheets will need to be cut exactly in half with tin snips.

Lay two of the posts on the ground so that each end of one of the 1.8 sheets covers one side of the post exactly.

Drill holes of the correct size to take wood screws through the ends of the sheet into the wooden post.

These should be drilled at the corrugation where it is in direct contact with the post which is opposite to where you would secure if the sheet was used on a roof.

Use 40 to 50mm screws. Next do the same to the other 1.8 sheet.

Now you have two long sides which should be stood up at the spot where you intend to

have the raised garden. The sheet that has been cut into half will now be screwed to the two ends to complete the raised garden. The position of one long side should be facing as much as possible to the north so that side gets just about all day sun to warm the soil in the raised garden.

The height of the garden allows you to work it from all sides without having to bend over.

This means if you are situating the raised garden near a fence or building ensure that you have adequate access all around it.

The next step is to fill the raised garden and first we start off by placing several layers of cardboard over the soil at the bottom. This does two things; suppresses any weeds or grass that is there and gives an idea food source for the earthworms which we want to attract into the garden.

Next we pile in any organic material such as leaves, lawn clippings, weeds, prunings and food scraps which is a good way of getting rid of a lot of rubbish. Ideally this should half fill the garden. Just toss the material in and do not compress. Scatter garden lime over this.

Over the top of the rubbish place more cardboard to cover the area.

Next you can place a good thick layer of homemade compost (if available) along with some top soil and any animal manure you can obtain.

If you do not have your own compost to use, then you will need to buy mushroom compost or similar.

Over this you place several layers of newspaper. Now you can add minerals such as a scattering of **Rok Solid, Ocean Solids and BioPhos**.

The final layer will be purchased compost which is weed free and can be mixed with blood and bone, sheep manure pellets, **Bio Boost** and aged chicken manure.

Some **Rapid Lime** can be included along with gypsum and dolomite.

The final height of the fill should be about 20cm below the top of the raised garden.

There is a very good reason for this; it means that young plants will be sheltered by the higher sides of the raised garden against wind.

Because of this shelter provided, the vegetables will grow quicker and fairly much straight up.

If planting vegetables crops that will reach different heights at maturity the taller ones will be planted at the back with the shorter ones on the side closest to the north.

When your crops are harvested you simply place a further layer of newspaper over the bare mix and another layer of purchased compost as described above in the final layer.

The material below will break down over time and this topping up will compensate for the level of the garden sinking downwards.

The long sides of the bed should not buckle outwards as you are not compressing any of the material and thus the pressure is mainly downwards not outwards.

A raised garden made in this way will last you many years and if by chance you shift homes you can simply unscrew the iron sheets and take them and the posts away to your next home.

You will likely be amazed at how fast seedlings grow and reach maturity as I was with my first plantings.

Other aspects would be to include vermicast and worms from your worm farm if you have one and this would be placed over the top of the news paper prior to the purchased

compost.

Sawdust or shavings from untreated wood can be used along with straw including pea straw in the lower layers.

Once planted vegetables should be sprayed with **Magic Botanic Liquid** every 2 weeks.

Watering should be only done with non-chlorinated water and just sufficient to keep the mix moist which likely means once a day in the summer when it does not rain.

Over the next month or two is a great time to get started with your raised gardens for the spring.

Problems ring me at 0800 466464 (Palmerston North 3570606)

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