

For Vermont Standard
Sage Sassafras column on gardening
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Intensive Raised Bed Vegetable Gardening

Remember the old saying: The bed you make you lie in. Well, the French have another take on this when it comes to gardening. They do everything to preclude adding any body mass to garden beds. They create raised beds that are intensively planted to yield more veggies with less water and fewer weeds in a smaller space.

Vegetables crowd out weeds while leaves keep roots shaded and moist. To plant intensively means to plant seeds closely in alternating spaces, creating a triangular pattern. Some people use a template but we just plant seeds in a triangle in alternating rows, thinning as plants germinate.

To begin, plot out a bed of any length but no wider than 5 to 6 feet so you can reach the entire bed from either side, making weeding much easier and producing healthier vegetables as the soil remains aerated because you don't walk on it.

Cut and remove the sod. With a good fork double dig the bed down to 2 feet breaking up clods. Top with 1 to 2 inches of good compost; feed with a thin layer of cotton seed meal followed by a very thin layer of wood ash. This translates roughly to about 4 pounds of cotton seed meal and 2 pounds of ash per 100 square feet. Fork it in and rake it to smooth out the surface. Contain the soil by creating an edge around the bed or frame it up with cedar planks. From now on you work only from the sides of the bed.

Fine seed vegetables are best suited to this system: lettuces, carrots, beets, herbs, flowers, parsnips, tomatoes, peppers, onions, spinach, bush beans. Also consider broccoli, cabbage, Brussels sprouts, squash, potatoes and cucumbers interspersed with sweet peas. (Larger plants that require trellising work best in traditional garden patches.) Consider adding color and cheer by adding alyssum and nasturtiums at the edges so they can spill out, and zinnias, marigolds, salvia and cosmos amongst the vegetables. Some are decorative on serving platters and tasty, and others, like marigolds, deter certain garden pests.