

## Beginning Gardening Part 3

In part one, we discussed the sun and how you must have 10 good hours of it to have a successful garden. Part two talked about soil testing and liming, and how important it is to get the soil's pH and nutrients to their correct levels. This week we'll talk about garden types and tillage.

It is important to note that all of these articles are pertaining to small garden plots, or those about 1500 square feet. A 30 ft by 50 ft garden is a good size to get started with, as the most important idea to keep in mind is that doing an excellent job with a smaller area is better than doing a sorry job with a larger one. This size is manageable, easy to keep well tended, and will be very productive with just a little effort. It's easier than you think!

I always get the question, "Should I add topsoil to my garden site?" My answer is always "No!" If you have soil and not rocks, you have a good starting point. If this is a new garden site, however, you will have a few choices to make. Will you use raised beds, permanent beds or traditional gardening? I'll give you a few positives and negatives about each one to help with the decision.

Raised beds are great. They are constructed by building a frame out of wood, logs, bricks, stone or steel, and then filling the inner area with soil. Most raised beds are 3 feet wide and 6 to 10 inches tall. This type of bed is popular in books and magazines for 3 reasons: a defined area is easier to maintain, the soil you add is easily amended with organic matter, lime and/or fertilizer, and lastly, the raised beds warm up quickly and drain well which helps with disease control.

There are a couple of negatives about raised beds, however. They are expensive and time consuming to construct. A way around this expense is to scavenge materials from other projects. The soil to fill the bed will cost you too. If you opt to buy soil instead of getting it from your own property, go with your own good old red clay as the base and then add 25% organic matter in year one. We have very little top soil for sale here in our county, and our red clay can be very productive with a little help.

Permanent, in ground beds are another very useful way to garden. One of our Master Gardeners, Craig McKenzie, has this method down to an art. After his initial tilling 8 years ago, Craig has mulched with leaves to correct pH and nutrient levels. The rows are lightly broken up each year to plant the new season's crops. The rows are permanent and are built up over time. Due to the mulch, little weeding is needed and water use is reduced. Craig is good for a tour anytime!

In traditional garden preparation, we plow and till each year. This method gives us a clean slate and allows us to really mix in the nutrients. It is easy to plant and hoe when the time comes. It may be easier to start a new garden this way. You will, however, need a neighbor with a tractor to deeply break up the soil, and then a tiller to break up the resulting chunks. The tiller will also help you mix the lime and nutrients down into the soil, where the roots grow. Never till wet soil!

We hope this series of articles is helping you plan your 2009 garden. If you follow the advice given, you should be successful. Next time, we'll talk about fertilizer use.