

Article for The Bristol Herald Courier Agriculture Page
Submitted by Anthony Flaccavento,
Appalachian Sustainable Development
Print Date: February 28, 2005

“Raise your Soil for Better Yields”

The past two growing seasons have been among the wettest we've ever seen. For folks hoping for a change in weather, the first few weeks of 2005 have hardly been encouraging.

One way to overcome wet, cool springs, and to increase the overall productivity of your farm or garden, is by making raised beds. Raised beds help wet soils drain more quickly, warm sooner and allow for earlier planting of seeds or plants. They also make for easier weed control, help improve soil tilth and allow you to grow more crops in a limited space. If it sounds too good to be true, well... it isn't.

What exactly is a raised bed? Simply, it is a wide, elevated bed of soil, typically about 6 inches in height and two to four foot wide across the top. In a home garden, beds may be just ten to twenty feet in length, while on small farms they'll range from 100 to 400 feet long, or more. They're shaped like a bed (duh!), smooth and flattened across the top.

Making a raised bed involves three steps: tilling, raking the soil and flattening the bed. Soil must first be well prepared, either tilled or disked until fairly smooth. A roto-tiller will do this for the gardener; a tractor tiller or disk is used by farmers. Once the ground is tilled, the soil is raked up in long, straight mounds, drawing top soil in from about a five foot width. This can be done with a steel garden rake or by mounding the soil up with two large disks drawn behind a garden tractor. Finally, smooth and flatten the bed out by drawing the steel rake, teeth up, down the length of the bed.

Farmers can use a tractor-drawn bed shaper which will make smooth, flattened beds in one pass across tilled soil.

Compost, and other soil fertility amendments should be concentrated in the beds. They can be spread on top of the flat ground and raked up as the beds are made, or worked into the top two inches of the bed, once made.

Small crops such as lettuce, carrots, and onions can be planted three or four rows thick in a single bed. Green beans, broccoli, and peppers should be planted in double rows about 18 inches apart. As plants mature, they'll form a "canopy", helping to shade out competing weeds (A mulch, or an earlier cultivation is strongly recommended). Large plants, such as zucchini or tomatoes, should be planted in a single row in the middle of the bed.

Besides accommodating denser crop plantings, raised beds keep the root zone of plants loose, helping water and air move through the soil readily. This improves the vigor of all plants, but is especially good for carrots, onions and other root crops.

So, if we ever get that dry spell we've all been looking for, till your ground and make some raised beds. Once established, these beds will take the wait and the mud out of spring planting.