

Hügelkultur

Hügelkultur is a method of establishing plants in a natural raised bed. Comprised of strategically layered organic materials of varying size, nutrients are released into the soil as decomposition occurs. The mounded shape lends well for drainage, capturing runoff from the landscape and maximizing sun exposure. Over time, the mound becomes rich with nutrients and the resulting structure is prime gardening space.

There are a variety of options for designing a hügelkultur mound to meet the needs of the site. The simplest design is a straight row. Establish the mound in a low spot of the landscape that receives six to eight hours of sunlight each day. The mound should be perpendicular with runoff flow in order to capture as much water as possible.

Gather an assortment of logs, branches, twigs and smaller garden waste. Dig a trench, ideally at least one-foot deep. The length and width depend on preference and the amount of organic materials available. Three feet by six feet is a good size for a residential hügelkultur mound.

Hügelkultur mounds can be built almost entirely underground, but this requires a much deeper trench. They can also be established above ground if digging a trench is not feasible. Decomposition occurs faster and water retention is greater in mounds with a deeper trench.

Place a layer of the largest logs at the bottom of the trench. On top lay smaller branches and twigs. Tuck leaves and other organic matter such as manure, grass clippings or soil into the spaces. This is an important step to prevent the mound from drying out. Continue layering smaller organic waste (leaves, kitchen scraps, compost, etc.) on top of the base layers until the mound is about four feet tall.

Follow the same rules for adding organic materials to the hügelkultur mound as traditional composting. This means no meat/dairy kitchen scraps nor dog/cat waste. Water and tamp between in each layer to improve the decomposition rate and reduce sinking. Cover the entire mound with two inches of top soil.

Though the mound can be planted during the first season, available nutrients will be limited since decomposition is just beginning. It may be necessary to add nitrogen to support plant growth. Cover crops can be grown the first year to increase nutrition. As the mound decomposes, water retention and soil nutrition will improve. The logs in the mound will absorb water and release it as needed reducing the amount of supplemental water that needs to be added. The mound will also sink in various spots as materials decompose. Each season, compost should be added to the mound to fill in low spots.

Hügelkultur mounds create an environment that supports microorganisms and diverse plant material. Sun-loving plants can be grown on the sunny side of the mound while more shade tolerant species can thrive on the other side. This is an inexpensive method of sustainable gardening that reduces waste by providing an outlet for landscape waste.

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National Institute of Food and Agriculture
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

March 6, 2024