



Inanda Day Primary school pupil, Menzi Ngwane, takes gardening lessons from his mentor, Goodman Ndlovu.

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Picture: BONGANI MBATHA

# Dos and don'ts of starting your own vegetable garden

Design beds to make use of soil and water in your area, and double dig, writes Myrtle Ryan

It has been said that school gardens are where the "magic" takes place, as they reach out into a community by showing a way of living through growing good quality food. However, there are also many thriving community gardens and projects which are playing their part in feeding people.

You may be all fired up and eager to start your own vegetable garden, but some advice from the experts could go a long way to ensuring success.

So, for the first-time gardener, here are some helpful hints, given by Robyn Hills, programme manager of Food and Trees for Africa, an organisation with over 25 years' experience in the field.

Hills advises that you design your beds to make use of the soil and the water. For example, elevating the beds in high rainfall areas to prevent water-logging. Elevation also helps in cold areas as it helps warm the soil. On the other

hand, beds in dry, arid areas may be sunken to harvest water.

You might consider using a swale – a low tract of land, especially one that is moist or marshy. Swale can refer to a natural landscape feature or a human-created one. Artificial swales are often designed to manage water run-off, filter pollutants, and increase rainwater infiltration.

Trench beds are only good for areas with sandy soil and high drainage, otherwise water-logging occurs.

Now you are ready to begin. First clear the tract of land you

plan to use of any rubble. Should you decide a trench bed best suits your area, it is good to "double dig" as this can greatly improve heavy, compacted or nutrient-poor soils.

What is double digging? You start by making a narrow trench (roughly the width and depth of a spade). Place removed soil in a wheelbarrow for later use.

Save any old plants or items you have dug up while clearing the land. Place them on one side as you may be able to use them in making compost.

In a future article, we will be telling you how to make compost.

If you already have compost, you should add about 10cm of it to your trench. Work it into the bottom of your trench, breaking up the soil thoroughly in the process.

Now remove the topsoil from a second trench and use this to fill in your first trench.

Work the lower layer of soil in your second trench, following the procedure taken with the first trench (that is, adding compost and breaking up the soil).

As you establish further trenches, each will follow the same procedure of dig and replace soil from the previous trench. Finally, when completing the final trench, put the soil in your wheelbarrow from your first trench into your last trench.

Make sure you establish a clear path between the trenches as walking on the soil compacts it, making it unsuitable for growing purposes.

The alternative is to use raised or elevated gardens, for areas where water does not drain easily. Hills advises that raised beds can be made with recyclable waste such as tyres, boxes, and containers, topped with soil. Strengthen your elevated patch with a border in order to prevent the soil washing away.

"To add structure to your soil, organic materials are best," said Hills. "Do not use rubble, as concrete is bad for the soil. Glass is also not a good idea, especially when children might be working these gardens."

She suggested adding kitchen waste, paper clippings or tins (but not broken pieces of tin with jagged edges, for the same reason that children might cut themselves).

As Hills said: "Such gardens can become a foundation for society as they help to bring marginalised groups together through something which everyone can relate to: nutrition."



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