

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

http://www.seattlepi.com/nwgardens/334992_berms13.html

NW Gardens: Give your garden a lift

Raised beds and berms boost plants out of soggy soil

Last updated October 12, 2007 9:54 a.m. PT

By MARTY WINGATE
SPECIAL TO THE P-I

Our rainy season began Oct. 1, and we are off to a roaring start, with a total already above normal. When the garden soil replenishes its moisture -- and then some -- we begin to notice those areas that don't drain well. There's nothing like a telltale squish to reveal "heavy" soil or as a clue that hardpan lies near the surface.

An easy solution to poor drainage or a flat landscape is at hand: Build a berm or raised bed.

Berms are raised contoured mounds of soil that have no supporting sides; "raised bed" can mean the same thing, but often means that the mound was made with supporting sides.

Building up a garden bed provides excellent drainage. It's an arrangement that suits conifers (apart from the few that tolerate boggy soil, including our Western white pine), heathers and a host of other ornamentals.

Berms are not the solution to soil-borne plant diseases, such as verticillium wilt, although they often are used as such. But they do help prevent plants from suffering the effects of too much water in areas with poor drainage.

A higher garden bed doesn't just solve water issues; it also works as an interesting design element. A berm can be an island bed, anchor a corner of the property, disguise a pathway or run along the wall of a garage. The extra elevation increases interest and adds a rolling hill effect to flat gardens.

Berms stretch the height of plants. Tall perennials take on importance with added elevation: A 6-foot *Eupatorium* 'Gateway' or 'Lemon Queen' sunflower (*Helianthus*) shoots up to 8 feet in a raised bed, and the 7-foot-high meadow rue *Thalictrum rochebruneanum* looms to 9 feet. And couldn't you use a couple of extra feet somewhere?

It even works with trees and shrubs. A large billowing smoke bush (*Cotinus*) becomes cloudlike, and the sharp outlines of a Korean fir (*Abies koreana*) slice the sky.


The slope of a berm implies movement, as if the plants were flowing downhill. That can be accentuated when you select plants with the same effect, such as the variegated Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola').

Now to the how-to.

Build the berm up 2 feet and contour the sides so that they slope gradually to ground. Sides that are too steep won't hold the mulch in place, and each time you water or it rains, the top layer will wash down onto the sidewalk or grass.

Many a berm is built in the middle of a lawn, and if you are a serious edger, you can keep the line between grass and bed clean. If you prefer help with this, install an edger, such as cut stones laid flat or ready-made edging of concrete.



 Andrew Buchanan /

Rather than try to move these large rocks, this berm incorporates them to add stability, structure and interest.

Bricks, rocks, boards, concrete are all viable materials for raised beds that have supportive sides. Vegetable gardeners plant in raised beds, restricting foot traffic to paths and making it easier to hoe and harvest.

Water drains through raised beds, and when the sides are made from stones that naturally allow planting holes, the gardener can tuck in such treasures as *Lewisia* for decoration.

Small sedum, such as *Sedum spurium* 'John Creech' can colonize nooks and crannies, too, or for a larger effect, use the evergreen hart's tongue fern (*Asplenium scolopendrium*). In its native habitat, its rosette of broad leaves stick out of the rock walls of England and Ireland.

One important note on raised beds: Don't put them in parking strips. When you open your car door against an ornamental grass, at least it gives a little -- unlike a rock.

When you create a new bed, you're in charge of the soil, so start with a good mix. Soil mixes come in "ways" -- 2-, 3- and 5-way mixes may contain loam soil, sand, compost, sawdust and/or peat. You can always add a little more compost to the mix, but it's easier to plant and then mulch with the compost.

Do not put down a layer of plastic as a barrier between old soil and new; you'll be creating a bathtub for the new berm. Landscape fabric is unnecessary, because nothing will come through 2 feet of soil that won't come through landscape fabric and 2 feet of soil.

Let the new bed settle, or tamp down the soil so that it isn't too loose; otherwise, your plants will sink as the material loses lift.

Managing your new well-drained bed requires some attention and regular water, at least until plants are established. It's just the place for a soaker hose covered in a layer of mulch, or a drip emitter system, which puts the water right where it's needed.

You haven't changed the fact that the ground below -- if it was soggy before -- will remain in a soggy state, so consider helping the water on its way elsewhere. Channel it with a gravel trough or dry streambed, or install French drains.

And always, when redirecting water, keep your neighbors in mind so that you don't pass off your problem to someone else. Instead, let them admire your skills in design and plant selection.

Marty Wingate, a Seattle-based Master Gardener, has a master's degree in urban horticulture and is the author of two garden books. She can be contacted at: martywin@earthlink.net.

© 1998-2009 Seattle Post-Intelligencer