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### Raised Bed Immunity Gardens

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The number of people growing vegetables increased last year. This year, the trend is to plant an immunity garden; which is still a vegetable garden.

If catchy trends encourage people to grow healthy vegetables, then I'm all for them. They can make gardening more fun and garden planning more mindful.

If you'd like to start a garden but have hard or compacted clay soil, making it difficult to grow much of anything, two options are improving soil over time with organic matter and reduced tillage, or using raised beds.

Raised beds are worked from the edge so there is no foot traffic compacting soil. The soil warms faster in spring so it can be worked and planted sooner; and it drains better than ground level gardens.

Raised beds range from soil mounded six to eight inches above ground level all the way up to three foot tall structures built to hold a planting medium. While raised beds are only three to four feet wide, they can be as long as you have space for.

To make a free-standing bed, or a shallow one supported by 2 inch x 6 inch untreated rot resistant lumber, select a site in full sun. Till or deeply spade the soil that will be beneath the raised bed to loosen it. Next, add six inches of finished compost or well-rotted manure to the existing area and lightly till again.

Ideally, manure is incorporated in fall rather than spring to reduce the risk of bacterial contamination. If used in spring, it must be very well rotted and decomposed. And as always, practice good hand washing when preparing fresh vegetables.

After incorporating organic matter, mound the soil into a flat-topped bed about six to eight inches high. Taper the sides to a 45 degree angle unless you plan to build a support around the bed. Wait at least one to two weeks before planting to allow the soil to settle.

Building structures for taller raised beds that act like containers can be expensive and time consuming. Some gardeners like their appearance and others use them if they have back issues or trouble bending or kneeling. Raised beds are often used by wheelchair gardeners.

Put some thought in to how tall you need these to be. Will you be gardening from a standing or seated position? From a seated position, raised beds are built to about 27 inches high. To garden while standing, they are about 30 to 36 inches tall. It depends on the height of the person gardening and their abilities.

Raised beds dry out more quickly and attention to watering will be needed. Because of increased watering frequency and improved drainage, attention to fertilization will also be important. Weeds are less of an issue in raised beds.

Another advantage to raised beds is they allow more to be planted in a smaller space. In place of having rows spaced 12 or more inches apart, the entire bed can be planted. While there is no need to follow the row spacing recommended, it is important to follow the spacing recommended between plants.

And if your goal is to plant an immunity garden, there needs to be more than Irish potatoes and onions. While these are nutritious, the more colorful the food on our plate, the more varied nutrition we receive.

When planning the garden, include a variety of colorful vegetables like tomatoes, green beans, radish, carrots, greens, bush squash and the list can go on.

### PSAs January 25, 2021 - Kelly Feehan

During an open winter with little snow, like we're currently having, it's even more important to maintain a protective mulch over tender perennials, sensitive roses and strawberries. Check these plants to be sure winter winds have not blown away mulch; or that snowfall we have had did not compress the mulch to too thin of a layer. It is often during late winter that cold temperature or winter dessication injury is most likely to occur. On days when winter temperatures are above average, and plant crowns are exposed or thinly covered, they may begin to break dormancy and become more likely to be damaged by subsequent cold temperatures. The important thing winter mulch does is keep dormant plants dormant and protect from drying. The later we go into winter with little snow cover, the more likely a plant will dry out and be injured. Check on tender landscape and fruiting plants and add protective mulch if needed.

It's that time of year when contracts for lawn and tree care work are being signed between homeowners and service providers. A question ash tree owners may be asked is if they want their ash tree treated for emerald ash borer this spring. To help with this decision, know the recommendation of the Nebraska Forest Service and Extension entomologists remains to wait to begin treatment until emerald ash borer has been found within 15 miles of a tree; if you chose to treat at all. Currently, emerald ash borer has not been found in or within 15 miles of Columbus or Norfolk. Know that ash trees can still be treated and saved even after they become infested, as long as damage is not too extensive. And there are some negative consequences to beginning treatment too soon. To help with the decision whether to treat or not treat ash trees for emerald ash borer, and when; contact your local Extension office.

Selecting different plants that are not commonly planted in an area can be challenging but rewarding. It can be challenging because garden centers, being good business people, tend to carry what customers ask for. And customers, being good consumers, tend to ask for plants they've seen and know they like. This works well with most products, but leads to issues in gardens and landscapes. When we overplant one type of tree, shrub or perennial, we create a monoculture. In nature and our landscapes, diversity is best. Monocultures lead to increased pest problems for overplanted plants; and less support for wildlife like songbirds and pollinators. If adding a new plant to your garden or landscape this spring, think "different". For ideas, check out Great Plants for the Great Plains on the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum website; or ask garden center retailers what is something different they would recommend.

Vegetable gardening is on the rise. If looking for a place to plant a new garden, here are a few pointers. Determine how much sun the site receives. While a few vegetables, like lettuce, radish, and green onions can be grown in part shade; most vegetables, like tomatoes, melons and green beans, need 7 to 8 hours of sun. Assess the soil for drainage and fertility. If the soil is marginal, improve it by adding organic matter. Dig in compost or well-aged manure to loosen compacted soil, add fertility, and improve drainage. If the soil is heavy clay, consider raising the planting area. Beds raised 4 to 6 inches above ground warm faster in spring and drain more quickly than ground level gardens. Raised beds do, however, dry out more quickly. A planting site should be easily accessible to water and somewhat protected by wind; but not planted so close to trees as to create root competition or reduce air movement around plants.

If you have small gnats flying around your home or windows, these may be fungus gnats. These nuisance pests are small fly-like insects mainly noticed around houseplants. They cause no harm to people, pets and rarely to plants. Fungus gnats develop in overwatered houseplant soil or poorly drained potting mixes. The larvae, which is a tiny maggot, lives and matures in the potting medium, mainly feeding on fungal or algal growth in overwatered soil. If the potting mix is harboring fungus gnats, cut back on watering frequency so the mix dries out briefly between watering. If needed, repot plants using a well-drained potting mix and containers with drainage holes. Pour excess water out of catch basins after watering. Reduced moisture limits fungal growth, hence fungus gnat larvae food. The upper two inches of the potting mix can also be treated with a labeled houseplant insecticide or insecticidal soap.