

Helpline Hot Topic for May 2019

African Keyhole Gardens

By Cynthia Zimmerman

Keys can be many shapes and sizes and can unlock many different things but they don't have real purpose until inserted in the right keyholes. As gardeners we may have key knowledge about compost, pH, pest control, plants, water, weather, etc. but unless that knowledge is properly applied it doesn't open the door to a successful garden.

I recently found a new key for gardening that might be helpful to some of you. In the 1990s a gardening technique was developed in several parts of Africa by humanitarian charities and missionaries for use in impoverished countries with poor weather, poor soil, and starving people. It is a way to grow that uses available resources with minimal cost and maximum production. In recent years it has even been used in Texas with great success. It is known as Keyhole Gardens.

The name Keyhole Garden comes from its shape. It can be square but most often is round with an open pathway way or wedge that allows easy access to the center of the garden. It is a raised bed described as a lasagna garden with composting and recycling all-in-one that requires less water and maintenance and can be made handicap-accessible. These gardens are most successful in hot, dry climates. The key is an active compost pile placed in the center of a round bed that helps to hold moisture and nutrients in the garden. It can work just as well on concrete base areas as on grass or dirt.

There are a number of variations on the Keyhole Garden but in Texas trials the standard is a six-foot-wide garden with the height determined by your personal needs and the materials you are using to make the raised bed. A twelve-inch-wide composting bin is placed in the center. The bin is filled with the same components as a worm bed; newsprint, cardboard, dead plants, kitchen trimmings, and red wiggler worms. The materials will gradually decompose with the help of the worms and the castings will nourish the soil and plants around the bin.

Even in our non-drought years, Fresno and Madera counties are classified as Mediterranean or hot dessert due to high temperatures and relatively low rainfall. Local soils range from very sandy to clay and hardpan and most need considerable work adding organic material to make them as productive as we'd like. The newer homes have less and less space for typical produce gardens. Baby boomers are active but aging finding bad backs and other physical limitations. If the hot climate, poor soil, water restrictions, poor drainage, lack of space, and/or limited physical mobility have been obstacles to having a successful garden, you just might want to try a Keyhole Garden.

There are a number of great websites with wonderful diagrams and pictures to help you start your own Keyhole Garden. There are even some kits that can be purchased for this purpose. The materials you have and your own sense of aesthetics will help you determine the best Keyhole Garden for your needs.

<https://ucanr.edu/blogs/blogcore/postdetail.cfm?postnum=25846>

African Keyhole Garden – Great Garden Idea!

<https://www.texascooppower.com/texas-stories/nature-outdoors/keyhole-gardening>

Keyhole Gardening – Unlocking the Secrets of Drought Hardy Gardens

https://www.bakerinstitute.org/media/files/page/4d152358/khg_card_final_english.pdf

How to Build a Keyhole Garden (great diagrams)

<https://www.gardeningchannel.com/how-to-make-a-keyhole-garden/>

How to Make a Keyhole Garden

<https://www.gardeningknowhow.com/special/spaces/keyhole-garden-beds.htm>

Keyhole Garden Beds – How to Make a Keyhole Garden

<https://preparednessmama.com/keyhole-garden/>

The Ultimate Raised Bed – Make a Keyhole Garden