

Gardening on Rooftops & Other Above-Ground Locations

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Co-Founder of ECHO, Retired

**Low cost, low technology, lightweight methods to produce food
on rooftops and other locations above the ground.**



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Cover Photo:

ECHO intern Sara Hendershot Hillegass growing sunflowers in a 3 inch bed of compost on ECHO's simulated rooftop.

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It is imperative that your first community project succeeds.

Consider the market before promising people that they can make money on their gardens.

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Some other examples for gardening on rooftops or above the ground

Introduction

Every year that I can remember the news is filled with instances of hunger, malnutrition, starvation, food riots and even mass relocations. Leaders have little control over the high prices of food, but are desperate to know what can be done to make more food available, at a lower price.

Quite aside from these problems, there has been a growing interest in urban food production in both economically developed and developing countries. Reasons are many.

- Ecological benefits to the city.
- A desire to use more locally grown food.
- Opportunities for micro farming activities for profit.
- The wholesomeness of allowing people to experience the joy of gardening.
- Producing food by or for families who cannot buy what they need.

Several large cities even have some impressive rooftop gardens on large buildings. Rooftop gardening was the initial use that we had in mind for the technologies described in this book. We soon realized that there are many situations other than on rooftops where these same techniques make gardening possible.

There is a major difference between ECHO's techniques and those used on or contemplated by planners for most rooftop gardens in wealthier countries. The techniques that I will describe can be done at a fraction of the expense that is normally considered necessary. They do not require specially engineered buildings to make sure that the roof can handle the weight of the soil. Gardens can even be grown on the edge of a tin roof of a shanty, as seen in this photo in Guatemala City.



The Last Agricultural Frontier

The root cause of most hunger and malnutrition around the world is not usually caused by a lack of food, although that may be changing. From the point of view of the hungry family, the cause is usually a lack of income sufficient to purchase the food. Anyone with enough income will be able to obtain food, except perhaps after major disasters or in a war zone.

There are so few options for the extremely poor. What can a family do if the national unemployment rate is over 50%, wages are a dollar or two a day, prices of food are increasing and may at times be even higher than in the USA, they have neither savings nor credit and there is no governmental safety net?

For many, an option of last resort is to find a piece of land somewhere and try to grow enough to at least keep the family alive. Hopefully there would be some excess that could be sold so that perhaps at least one child could go to elementary school and emergency medical expenses could be met.

But how does someone in an urban area with nonexistent financial resources get land to cultivate? Perhaps they could find some land that they could farm on a share basis (e.g. half of the produce goes to the owner.) But often the only option is to go beyond the frontier of where commercial agriculture has gone—essentially to places that people with money do not want. They might be able to start farming on a piece of land far down the side of a remote mountain somewhere, or in the rainforest, or where there might be a nine-month dry season every year.

Such land has many disadvantages. It is typically remote from markets which means prices for produce are very low and agricultural inputs expensive. Often there is environmental damage when steep hillsides are cultivated or forests are cleared to make way for crops. Yields are low and uncertain due to infertile soils and unreliable rainfall. Farming on this last frontier is difficult!



But there is another frontier for agriculture that has been overlooked almost everywhere—the frontier above us! In contrast to the difficulties and environmental harm common to the last frontiers for in-ground agriculture, farming on urban rooftops has many advantages.

- The urban gardener can sell at full retail price because there is no need for transportation and middlemen
- The environment inside the house and even in the community is improved as the gardens absorb energy from the sun, thus lowering the temperature of the air and of the roof of the building.
- Production is more consistent because it does not depend on unpredictable rainfall (assuming that city water is available).
- Finally, no fences are needed to protect the garden from wandering livestock.

Many of the principles and techniques that I am about to describe have turned out to be useful for gardeners in the United States. In fact, most of my home gardening (flowers, vegetables and herbs) is now done using some of the techniques that I am about to describe. I find that I have greater success with less effort using these “containers” than with the same plants grown in the ground around my home. I will share examples where I have adapted our “rooftop experience” to solve challenging gardening problems in my own landscape.



How Did ECHO Become Involved in Rooftop Gardening?

My first overseas trip for ECHO was in 1981 to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. I was visiting with a missionary nurse, Beth Mayhood, standing on the flat roof of a building she had just completed to house the orphans she cared for. We were discussing how the building took up about half of the land she owned and how the children needed what little land was left for recreation. This left no place to plant a garden. That was quite a disappointment because she wanted to involve the kids in gardening and the children also needed the vegetables it would produce.

Our discussion turned to whether it might be feasible to garden on the roof of the orphanage. It represented 2500 square feet of perfectly flat “land” in full sun. As we looked around we could see dozens of flat rooftops. The city has acres of potential growing areas that are just one staircase away from an enormous (and hungry) urban population.





I also noticed that rebar protruded through and several inches above the cement along each side of the roof. [“Rebar” refers to long metal rods that are placed in the foundation, walls and cement roof of a building under construction. When cement is poured the rebar adds strength to these essential structures and helps tie them all together.] In many tropical cities it is standard practice to leave the rebar protruding along the edges of the roof so that the owner would have the option in the future of tying an additional story to the rest of the building when the money becomes available. Keeping that option alive is even more important in countries where owning a building may offer more security than money in the bank. The protruding rebar indicated to me that the roof was designed to hold considerable weight in the event that it someday became the floor of a second story.

The potential was obvious, but how would one go about gardening on a rooftop in a manner that did not cost a lot of money and would not endanger the structure? We first thought of hydroponic gardening, i.e. using systems where plants are grown without soil. But these very productive commercial or home hobbyist systems are complicated, relatively expensive, and usually require pumps to move water or bubble air and must work without fail during the life of the plants. The electricity was often off in Haiti, so that alone ruled out most hydroponic systems.



Photo taken from
“Hydroponics and
Microfarms CD”

I told Beth that when I returned to ECHO we would begin a project to see how gardens could be grown on rooftops that were simple and inexpensive enough to be appropriate for an impoverished nation with limited infrastructure. By the time we had some systems ready to be tried, Beth's health had failed and she was no longer at the orphanage. It meant a lot to me though that she did get to visit ECHO and see some of the promising early experiments. Every year since then we have maintained year-round demonstrations of the most successful techniques for rooftop gardening in ECHO's urban gardening section and are always trying out a few new ideas too.

A visitor recently asked, "How did ECHO come up with these innovative container gardens? Did you stumble on them by accident?" The answer is that we concentrate on the three things that roots require: air, water and nutrients plus something to keep the sun and wind from drying out the roots (see Chapter 1). We make no assumptions about what the container or growing medium should look like. We think about what spatial arrangements and what recycled or inexpensive things we can find or buy that will let us meet these basic requirements. Then we set about doing trial and error experiments until we achieve good production.

Some systems demonstrated at ECHO were our own ideas and some have been adapted from work of other people or organizations. It was especially helpful when we were doing the early experiments exchanging ideas with Pat Lahr, a missionary in Haiti who specialized in urban gardening. (See photo.)



You can simply follow some of the designs in this document or do some creative thinking and come up with your own. The latter option is likely to be necessary if you work with the extremely poor where you must use recycled materials and sources of fertility that may be different from what ECHO has used.

Lessons Learned from Initial Discouragements

Being an avid gardener, I was thrilled when Bonnie and I moved eleven hundred miles south from Ohio to ECHO in SW Florida in June of 1981. I imagined that I was about to garden in the Garden of Eden—at least a lot closer to that than in wintry Ohio. I got the surprise of my life. Most of the common vegetables that I grew in Ohio simply could not survive the heat, humidity and intense sunlight of a Florida summer. As for winter, the normal time to grow temperate vegetables in Florida, I found that the climate is usually warm but that the days are much shorter and the sun is low on the southern sky. Furthermore, although it is not unusual to have a frost or a freeze right in the middle of the ideal growing season, it does not get cold enough to kill the pests in the ground. As I write this, 36 years later, I now know what to grow and when to grow it. But as often as not, freezes, frosts, nematodes or diseases ruin even my tomatoes before I get to eat them. Most vegetables never reach the size they did up north where days are long and the sun is more intense than in the Florida winter growing season.

I had never given thought to root knot nematodes before gardening in Florida. These are microscopic wireworms that live in the soil and attack roots of many kinds of vegetables. Where nematodes are present and thrive, it is almost like having poisonous soil. Soon the roots of susceptible crops, like tomato or squash, are covered with knots that keep water and nutrients from being taken up from the soil. And nematodes especially like sandy soil. ECHO's farm has only sand for soil. Interestingly, nurseries in the early 1980s were coping with nematodes by selling tomato plants grown in half-bushel bean hampers (baskets) filled to near-the top with wood chips. Nurseries sold the baskets, mulch and tomato plant plus soluble hydroponic fertilizer as a packaged system.

Rather than buy their system, I created a similar environment by filling five-gallon buckets with wood chips, after first making drainage holes of course, and planted a tomato in each bucket. I poured a dilute hydroponic fertilizer solution on the tomatoes every day or two and let it drain onto the wood chips below. The plants grew beautifully without a hint of nematodes. (That is because nematodes were not present in the wood chips. And, if they somehow were transferred there from the soil, they do not thrive in wood chips.) My tomatoes did much better than tomatoes in the sandy Florida soil.

How can a tomato grow in wood chips? We will address that subject in Chapter 1.

Chapter 1. Basic Principles

What Do Roots of Plants Require to Give Good Production?

The roots themselves require a constant supply of only three things. I am assuming that other conditions for plant growth are met, such as sunlight, appropriate temperatures, and a means of support. The three things roots require are:

- a constant supply of air
- a constant supply of water
- a constant supply of nutrients

It is also necessary to provide a means to

- keep the sun and wind off of the roots
- provide a space where the roots can grow
- support the growing plant (in some cases)

That's it. Note in particular that the roots of most vegetables do not require soil, potting mix or a deep container. In fact, the place where the plants grow can be so shallow that it is almost a two-dimensional "container," e.g. a piece of cloth. Really large plants like trees and shrubs would of course require a larger volume in which to grow and support the plant.

So how did the tomatoes thrive in woodchips? There was a lot of space between wood chip particles, which meant that the roots are constantly exposed to air. I watered it frequently enough that the roots could draw water from the surface of the constantly moist chips. I added a complete fertilizer to the water, so the roots had a constant supply of nutrients. The wood chips kept the sun and wind off of the roots and provided a space in which the roots could grow. Those are the only needs, so it is not important that no soil was present.

Criteria for Selecting Container Gardening Methods

I use six criteria in selecting container gardening methods for those with limited financial resources. Here I am thinking of the exceptionally poor, living primarily in urban environments. However, the simplicity of these low-technology methods, the reduced risk of sudden failure if a piece of equipment stops working, and low cost are attractive to most of us even in the United States.



Here are the six criteria:

1. **Very low weight per area.** This will not be a factor if the garden is not located on top of an unsubstantial roof or if it is placed on some other solid, sturdy structure, e.g. if it is on a large flat rock or in a container sitting on the ground.

2. **Inexpensive, almost no cost, preferably based on recycled materials.** Because gardens made from recycled materials are often free or nearly free, this has obvious merit for any of us. Even if money is no object, it is satisfying to know that our container gardens have minimal negative impact on the environment. Naturally a person with greater income may put more value on appearance. For example, s/he may choose to paint a tire or purchase and paint a child's wading pool for the container. (See photo taken on top of a school. It was sent to us from a member of the "ECHO network" in South America.)



3. **Satisfactory production with minimal inputs.** Our goal is to get good production that meets these six criteria, not to try to match the high producing commercial hydroponic gardens.

4. **No energy or moving parts needed.** Electricity in some situations in developing countries may not be available, or power outages are frequent. Even in Florida we have occasionally lost our electric power long enough that the disruption would have caused us to lose our plants if their survival depended on near-continuous operation of some higher technology system.

5. **Made from local materials (not imported).** This is very important in economically developing countries where imported things are almost always expensive. It is not as important a factor in economically developed countries.

6. **No instruments or analyses needed.** Commercial hydroponic systems are incredibly productive, but such high levels of production require frequent monitoring and adjusting of nutrient levels. Neither the poor nor the average North American homeowner want to bother with this level of technical detail.

If There Is No Soil the Plant Is Like a Baby—You Must Provide Everything It Needs for Health.

Plants require several essential elements that they normally obtain from the soil. If any one of these is absent or in very low amounts, the plant may fail to thrive or reproduce, will likely develop misshapen or off-colored leaves, and may die. The elements are grouped into three types, based on how much of each element is needed.

The “big three” nutrient elements that healthy plants require are nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium—the N, P, and K found on all general-purpose fertilizer labels. Two more elements, calcium and magnesium, are needed in considerable quantities, but considerably less than N, P, and K. These five are called “macro-nutrients” and are found in fertilizers most commonly used with crops grown in the field or garden. In addition, several “minor” or “trace” elements are needed, but in extremely small quantities compared to the major big five. They may need not be added to reasonably fertile soil, but will need to be added if there is no soil (i.e. hydroponically). These include boron (B), chlorine (Cl), manganese (Mn), iron (Fe), zinc (ZN) copper (Cu), molybdenum (Mo), nickel (Ni) and cobalt (Co). I seldom added micronutrients when I gardened over a thousand miles north of ECHO, in Ohio. But I usually add them here in Florida’s sandy soil where they may well be present in very inadequate amounts.

If the garden medium has all of these in approximately the right amounts throughout the growing season, results should be good. But it is up to the gardener to make sure this happens. Adding well-rotted manure or compost to the bed may be all that is necessary. Don’t assume though that organic material that appears black and rotted has just the right mix of nutrients. There is an art to making really good compost, not to mention the work.

If these are not available, then chemical fertilizers can be used to provide the nutrients. The N, P and K can come from almost any fertilizer made for farmers or gardeners. (A series of three numbers on the fertilizer label refers to these three in sequence, e.g. 10-5-8 means that there is 10% nitrogen, 5% phosphorous and 8% potassium.) A higher priced fertilizer may contain N, P and K plus micronutrients, which will be listed individually by name or chemical symbol. I usually go to a local feed store and ask for so many bags of “10-10-10 with micro nutrients.” Fertilizers that have been manufactured in a special way so that the nutrients dissolve slowly over many weeks are called “slow release fertilizers.” This is an advantage where there are frequent rains that may dissolve and wash away the nutrients. You can also buy the N, P and K fertilizer and supplement it with a micronutrient mix that contains only the micronutrients. Finally, farmers and gardeners sometimes use specially formulated fertilizers that are designed to dissolve quickly in water for use in a hydroponic system or to sprinkle over the leaves of plants. I will refer to them as hydroponic fertilizers.

Now there is one complication to growing in a completely soilless medium where all nutrients must come from the water. I know that most readers will not want to hear that it is a bit more complicated but you will fail if it is not understood. When gardening in some setting without the usual soil or compost, with every nutrient being added by you, the fertility problem you are most likely to run into is that of an insufficient amount of the lesser two of the five macronutrients, calcium and magnesium.

ECHO once set up a series of experiments with a soilless growing method we wanted to evaluate. We purchased a bag of fertilizer that said, “Everything needed for a complete soilless mix.” Halfway into the experiment, all the plants started having problems. Belatedly, I looked at the fertilizer label more closely and noticed that it had N, P, K and all the micronutrients, but it did not contain calcium or magnesium. Apparently, they assumed that we would buy some company’s potting mix called “a complete soilless mix” and that “soilless mixes” contained inert ingredients plus magnesium and calcium! We had to abort the experiment.

A homeowner growing plants in any soilless medium that has not had nutrients added might think that s/he could purchase a soluble fertilizer (in the United States the most common one is called Miracle Grow) and it would provide everything that is needed. Beware though, for if you read the label you will likely not find magnesium or calcium on the list of nutrients. Fortunately, it is not very difficult to provide these two nutrients. The reason these two nutrients are not present in soluble fertilizers is that they will quickly bind with other nutrients to make an insoluble salt that settles to the bottom.

In any soilless gardening method, I like to add a special kind of limestone called dolomitic limestone, or simply dolomite. All limestone contains calcium carbonate, and so is a source of calcium. But dolomitic limestone also contains magnesium carbonate. Both kinds of limestone can be purchased in any gardening store in the USA and I suspect in many countries. Farmers usually think of adding lime (calcium carbonate) to reduce the acidity of the soil, but it is also a great source of calcium. This finely ground stone does not appear to dissolve, but over time it slowly releases the elements in the soil.

This may be all that you need to do to provide for the calcium and magnesium, but it could become depleted or may not dissolve quickly enough to support rapidly growing plants. So in my gardens at home I water container gardens about once a week with soluble fertilizers that do not contain calcium or magnesium, using about one tablespoon per gallon. Our city water apparently contains enough calcium. But every other time I add about half a tablespoon of Epsom salts (magnesium sulfate) that instantly dissolves and makes up for any magnesium deficiency. I don’t wait until I see a problem; I just add it to make sure no problem arises. It is inexpensive and can be purchased at any pharmacy (ask for Epsom salts) or garden center.

Whether you use fertilizer, manure or manure tea depends on your location (and philosophy). In many urban situations it is easier to obtain fertilizer than manure and it is much less smelly. Remember that your goal is to have a foolproof system that can be taught to and duplicated by dozens of gardeners. You can develop very precise instructions for a system designed to use a particular commercial fertilizer, but it will be much more difficult with manure tea.

“Manure tea” is made by soaking animal manure in water (usually in a permeable bag such as burlap) for several days. With the aid of microbial organisms, nutrients are released and dissolve into the water. The dark, smelly liquid is used to fertilize the growing medium. It may be necessary to dilute the tea first. Manure tea should never make direct contact with the edible part of the plant because it may contain disease organisms. Just because it is organic does not mean it is “safe”

The response of plants to manure depends upon the age of the manure, the animal’s diet, how much bedding is included in the manure, and on the kind of animal. (Goat manure is reportedly one of the best manures for hydroponic systems. This may be because goats are browsers, eating a little from many kinds of plants each day. Consequently, their manure has a composite of nutrients found in a wide variety of plants.) Do not just assume that people cannot afford fertilizers, especially if the produce is to be sold.

Why do we rely so much on fertilizers? When I give presentations on rooftop gardening methods I am often asked, “Why do you promote methods that rely so heavily on commercial fertilizers?” ECHO exists to help the exceptionally poor to grow food plants for their own use and possibly to provide them with an income. Our intent is to provide development workers as well as more affluent gardeners with alternative methods for many scenarios. At the risk of sounding trite, let me say that the world is a very big and diverse place! If one of ECHO’s low-tech and extremely light weight hydroponic systems is the best for your situation and makes economic sense, that may be the one you will choose. If weight is no problem and there is plenty of rich soil or compost, a bed at least six inches deep might be ideal and you would not need fertilizer.

Many have suggested making a hydroponic garden with manure tea as the source of nutrients. The basic method of making manure tea is to place a burlap bag of manure in a barrel of water and let it sit for a few weeks. Nutrients slowly leach from the bag turning the water into a dark “tea.” We have not found manure tea by itself to be sufficient to provide every nutrient in the right amounts. If plants show signs of nutrient deficiency you can try fertilizing with a manure tea as a supplement. We often use manure tea (or a hydroponic fertilizer) at ECHO as a nutrient boost to a bed that is already relatively fertile.

If you were going to rely heavily on manure tea, then you would need a more precise, repeatable way of making it. You could develop your own precise formula, e.g. so much manure of a certain age from a certain kind of animal allowed to stand in a certain amount of water for a specific time.

It is important to make sure that manure tea does not come into direct contact with the edible parts of the plants because the manure may contain disease-causing microorganisms. In general, disease-causing microbes are more likely to dominate a system where organic matter is decaying under anaerobic (little or no oxygen is present) conditions and are not so prominent in well-aerated systems. I suppose one could avoid this by vigorously bubbling air into the barrel, but that is a higher level of technology than is suitable for most of those whom ECHO exists to serve.

Our first attempt at a soil-less rooftop garden. When I returned from my first trip to Haiti I began considering what kind of garden would be suitable for the roof of that orphanage. It is hard to beat the productivity of a good raised-bed garden made from fertile soil and compost as long as weight is not a problem. I ruled out finding enough quality soil or making enough compost to create significant gardening space on a Port-au-Prince rooftop (to say nothing of the work of getting it onto the roof). And the weight of many beds of deep soil was definitely a problem.

I decided to base my first rooftop garden on the principle behind the successful tomatoes I was growing in woodchips in half-bushel bean hampers. Wood chips are lighter than soil and meet the criteria that beds should be made of materials that are recycled and at little or no cost in the community where the gardens are being grown. They are free in my community because tree-trimming companies produce countless truckloads of woodchips every day and welcome a place to dump them where they do not need to pay a landfill charge. The nature of the materials will differ from community to community and especially in different climatic zones.

Buildings at ECHO do not have flat cement rooftops, but there was a rectangular cement slab on the farm that measured about 5 ft by 8 feet. I decided to pretend that it was a rooftop and build a woodchip garden on it. I found some old roofing material and made sides to hold a three-foot deep garden. That was a bit deeper than the woodchips in the bean hamper basket system that had given good production of tomatoes.





OK Production, Lots of Fertilizer



I filled the garden with woodchips, added some garden fertilizer with micronutrients and some dolomitic limestone, and then thoroughly wet the garden. I quickly realized that this would be way too heavy for a rooftop. But it was built, so I planted a variety of vegetables and some flowers. Every day I poured some soluble fertilizer over the top of the plants. Amazingly it was a productive garden. But it used too much material, was too heavy and required a lot of fertilizer.

Here is a very important point when growing in organic materials that have not yet been decayed into compost. **The reason it required so much fertilizer is that I was both feeding the plants and the microbes that were silently at work decaying the woodchips.** After about a year of continuous production in a warm climate the woodchips in such a garden turn into beautiful dark compost. So most of the fertilizer is not really wasted after all and you end up with beautiful compost.

Few if any roots extended to the bottom of the bed, so it was clearly much deeper than we needed. What would happen if we made the woodchip garden shallower—much more shallow? We made some 2x4 foot trays about 3 inches deep, filled them with woodchips, planted some vegetables and watered with a soluble fertilizer that contained all the required nutrients plus added dolomitic limestone. To our surprise these shallow gardens did as well or better than the deep woodchip garden and used much less fertilizer. We called it “a shallow bed garden.” A welcome extra benefit of these very lightweight shallow bed gardens is that when a rare southern Florida freeze came we could easily carry the gardens into a garage for the night.



This led to many trials with various depths and using various materials for the growing medium. This will be discussed in the following chapter, where we will take a closer look at just how to make the various kinds of gardens in unlikely places.

Chapter 2: The Three Basic Types of Gardening Systems

It is hard to beat a well-made raised-bed garden that has good soil mixed with plenty of compost and receiving just the right amount of rain. If the only place for a garden is on a rooftop or a paved driveway or large flat rock, then using the same soil and compost to create a deep bed on the hard surface should give results very similar to what they would give in your garden. (However, you may need to add water more often than if it were a raised bed in a garden because the roots of some plants may normally grow deeper into the soil in search of water than the depth of your bed on a solid surface will allow.)

One needs to be more creative though if: (1) it is important to keep the weight at a minimum because it is on some structure such as a rooftop that was not designed to support the weight of the garden or (2) if there is no good soil available, compost is in scarce supply and people cannot afford to purchase a commercial potting mix to use in making a bed.

The most straightforward way to create a garden that weighs less is to make a planting bed with much less material than in a conventional garden—in other words, to make it shallower. ECHO refers to these as “SHALLOW BED GARDENS.” I very loosely and subjectively define “shallow bed” as meaning any bed whose depth is less than you might formerly have thought necessary. They can in fact be incredibly shallow if someone is prepared to add water several times a day, or if one devises a means to slowly add water throughout the day. The thickness of these beds is limited only by the logical condition that they must be of some minimal thickness, perhaps half an inch.

Biggest Drawback to Shallow Beds

Need to water more frequently

Storage capacity of the bed is proportional to total volume of the bed

Another approach is to forget about beds totally and have no soil or potting mix (at least not a potting mix that most people would think of as such). A very successful technique that achieves this is to garden on nothing but a piece of cloth, with something, almost anything, placed on top to keep the sun and wind from hitting the roots. For example, the cloth might be covered by gravel, pine needles, pinecones, wood chips, used cola cans, or coconut husks. ECHO refers to these extremely “shallow” gardens grown on cloth as “WICK GARDENS.”

A third approach is to simply grow plants with their roots in a pool of water that contains sufficient dissolved air and all the nutrients essential to healthy plant growth. We call gardens grown in shallow pools of water “SHALLOW POOL GARDENS.”

Later in this book, after we take a deeper look at these three basic methods, we will discuss several gardening methods featured at ECHO that are hybrids (combinations) of these three systems. For example, we will discuss gardens made from wicks that go up instead of lying flat, wicks with a shallow bed on top, shallow pools with a shallow bed suspended over them, and shallow pools that have a shallow bed sitting in the pool (water reservoir) itself.

The Big Three: The Shallow Bed Garden

What plants will grow in a shallow bed?

We have had success growing a wide variety of vegetables in shallow beds. Some examples include amaranth, broccoli, cabbage, cow peas, corn, eggplant, cucumber, green beans, herbs (rosemary, tarragon, basil, sage, mints, chives, garlic chives), cabbage, collards, broccoli, kale, kohlrabi, lettuce, okra, onions, Lagos spinach, radishes, edible podded peas, tomatoes, winged beans, sweet corn, yard-long beans and a variety of flowers.

It is easier to say what crops may give problems. We usually stay away from large vines that have such a large leaf area that they quickly deplete the reserve of water in the shallow bed, such as tropical pumpkins, watermelon, jicama or sweet potatoes. The shallow pool or “hybrid” methods described later may be better for these large plants; however, with sufficient volume (with either a deeper bed or fewer plants in a bed) or more frequent watering, there should not be a problem growing these larger leafed plants, letting them flow over a rooftop, down the side of the building, or over rocky soil.

Root crops require deeper beds. We have grown acceptable carrots in grass clippings, but had to make the bed about eight inches deep. The bed shrank so much during the growing season as the grass clipping decayed that the carrots stuck out of the top by an inch. Carrots grown in a 3-inch deep bed had L shaped roots because the bed was too shallow. Carrots grown in wood chips were distorted because of the twists and turns the taproot made to avoid wood chips, permanently affecting their shape. This does not seem to be a problem with radishes though.

The Shallow Bed Garden on a roof is usually a bed of perhaps 3-6 inches. If the roof is quite limited in the weight it can bear, then either no soil is used, some lightweight material is mixed with the soil, or the bed is very shallow. If sufficient compost is not available (a common situation), plants can be successfully grown in fresh organic matter of many kinds. Such beds are fertilized and covered with at least a thin covering of compost or soil. Almost any vegetable can be grown in shallow beds. Once the beds are established, they are like regular gardens except in their need for more frequent watering and, for some, a method to support the plant as it grows upward.



How deep should the “shallow” bed be?

If there were no other considerations, an above-ground bed that was perhaps 9-12 inches would be about ideal. That is more than sufficient to support even tall plants like sweet corn or sunflowers and to encourage plenty of root growth for even the most demanding of plants. For most rooftop applications, however, the bed will probably need to be shallower than this.

A bed half that deep would have the advantages of weighing half as much and requiring half as much material to be located and moved to the roof to make the bed, then removed from the roof if plans later change. The biggest disadvantage is that the maximum amount of water the bed can store is half as much as in the one twice that deep. This means that it will need to be watered twice as often. A bed a tenth as deep would hold only one tenth as much water and need to be watered ten times as often, and so on. Ultimately one could end up with a bed of perhaps an inch or less that might need to be watered several times on hot, sunny, windy days if there was a big leaf area through which a lot of water was being transpired into the atmosphere.

Choosing the material for the shallow bed garden

Fortunately, in constructing shallow beds we can consider almost any growing medium because the weight is not much of a factor if the bed is not very deep.

At ECHO we tried beds made from whatever we could think of to see what would happen, e.g. regular soil, compost, woodchips, sand, gravel, grass clippings from lawns, corncobs. Had we been in a tropical country we would also have tried things like rice hulls, shredded coconut husks, sugar cane bagasse (what is left after the juice is squeezed from the cane), coffee pulp, etc. We found that we could grow plants in any of these, but not all were equally good. I was especially surprised at how well many vegetables did in a shallow bed of grass clippings.



Professor B. D. Cotton, an ECHO volunteer who spends most of his time in his native England, tells me that in England and other European countries it is very common to grow vegetables in plastic “grow bags” filled with well-rotted manure, peat, compost or some commercial potting mix. I have seen enormous green houses near St. Petersburg, Russia growing winter vegetables in similar bags. These would fit into the category that I would call shallow beds.

You should experiment with mixtures. When possible, if compost is not available, we like to use a mixture of different kinds of organic matter (dead plants) and perhaps inorganic materials. Mixtures are especially good because you have more flexibility to create the kind of environment that roots like. It is also likely that if a needed nutrient is not released as one component begins to decay, it will be met by another component. You can include many common garbage items.

A bed made from grass clippings and soft drink cans turned out to have some special advantages. Such a bed can be several inches deep but still not too heavy, enabling larger vegetable plants to grow without special support. This bed is constructed using approximately 40% by volume soft drink cans (with slits cut into the sides so roots can enter or be near that well-aerated and hopefully humid interior). The other 60% is grass clippings mixed between and placed on top of the cans. Ordinary garden fertilizers may be added if necessary. We added the soft drink cans when we found that a grass clipping bed deep enough to support taller vegetables heated up enough to negatively impact plant growth. Also due to rapid decay, the beds shrank into a rather shallow bed that became so dense that the roots could not get enough air. A variety of okra that grows to perhaps four feet tall produced well in the grass clipping and soft drink can bed without any special means of support. We have not tried this again. If you experiment with this technique, let us know what happens. An alternative to soft drink cans might be pieces of coconut husk placed positioned so that there were air spaces under each piece.



A bed made from a 2-5-inch layer of weeds packed closely together and covered with perhaps a couple inches of grass clippings or (better) compost from a previous bed works well. A 6-8 inch deep bed for corn/maize was made in this way. A benefit to placing weeds on the bottom (rather than grass clippings, for example) is that there are more air spaces between the weeds, which is better for roots.

Once you have settled on the materials for garden construction, the available fertilizers, and the vegetables to be grown, you will be able to develop straightforward, detailed instructions for your unique system of shallow bed gardening. That is what you will pass on to new gardeners in your community.

Constructing the Shallow Bed

No Container is Necessary. An important factor that makes these beds inexpensive is that no container is necessary. Depending on the material used, sides may not even be needed, especially if mulch is placed on top or at least on the edges of the bed. Sides are only necessary if the garden is placed on a platform or table of some sort where the garden extends right to the edge of the structure, or where appearance is important. We have had a lot of heavy rains and strong winds over the years, but the only bed that gave us a serious erosion problem was one in which we used a large amount of silt from the bottom of a fishpond.

The Shape of the Bed. The shape of shallow beds is determined by the same considerations that one uses in making raised beds. They can be of any length, but a break for a path every 8-12 feet is helpful. They should be just wide enough (4-5 feet) so that a person can reach to the middle of the bed from either side. Thought should also be given to maximum use of space. Depending on the size of the rooftop, a path down the length of the rooftop with beds and aisles going off to either side might be the most efficient.

Begin with a sheet of plastic. If a sheet of plastic is available, we like to place it on the roof surface and then build the garden on top of the plastic. People are understandably hesitant to place the garden bed directly on the roof surface because of the danger of damage to the roof. Roots might grow into any cracks that might be in the cement and eventually make them larger. Placing the garden directly onto a cement rooftop might cause minor discoloration. The plastic should eliminate both problems. If there are substantial cracks already in the cement roof, water might seep through to the ceiling below. The plastic should minimize, but not eliminate, this possibility. No doubt it will always be moist under the plastic, but that is less of a worry than a considerable supply of water and roots in direct contact with the roof.

Pat Lahr found that the roof surface stayed constantly wet under the plastic, though there was not a lot of water. Without plastic the roots would occasionally dry the beds and hence the roof surface under the beds. Whether there is any benefit to having occasional dry surfaces is doubtful and the risk of roots growing into cracks would seem to be more of a problem.

Starting with a sheet of plastic where the garden is on top of the ground keeps the growing medium and roots completely isolated from the soil and any diseases or pests that inhabit the soil. It lets you avoid any chemical imbalances in the soil, e.g. highly acidic or alkaline soils, heavy clay, aluminum toxicity etc. It would also solve a common concern in the United States that lead may have accumulated in the soil from paint in areas where old houses were demolished or burned. It keeps out invading tree roots as long as the garden bed itself stops just short of the edge of the plastic sheet.

Choose materials to make the bed. Look for materials that are light weight and easily obtained at little or no cost, such as wood chips, rice hulls, chopped banana trunks, sugar cane bagasse, or grass clippings that have spent several weeks in a pile (more on grass clippings below). You can place pulled weeds in the bed as long as they are covered with enough soil that they will not germinate. Avoid plants such as Napier grass (elephant grass) because the stems readily sprout and grow. Also avoid plants that are currently bearing ripe seeds that might become weeds.



Arrange the materials to form the bed, then thoroughly wet the bed. If you notice that water doesn't tend to adhere to the surfaces of the material you are using, as often happens if the materials are quite dried out, add a tablespoon or so of dishwashing or laundry detergent (any variety) to the watering can and pour evenly over the surface. Detergents fall under a class of compounds known



scientifically as wetting agents or surfactants (surface-active-agents). They help water adhere to surfaces. This will help keep the materials constantly moist, and so hasten decay. It is also important that the particles composing the bed be easily wetted

because the roots that will begin growing in the bed will get much of their moisture from the surfaces of these particles.

You can transplant seedlings directly into these beds. However, you may find that seeds do not absorb enough moisture to germinate, or tend to dry out between waterings. See the section below on “Planting in the new bed.”

Techniques for using grass clippings to make a shallow bed garden.

We place the grass clippings in large piles (perhaps a meter across and a meter high) until needed. Within a few weeks the pile will have heated up and considerable decomposition will have begun. Also we believe (no data) that most pesticides that might have been on or in the grass clippings are likely to be destroyed during this time of elevated temperatures caused by high biological activity.

If the pile of grass clippings is not too old, the contents will be fluffy and moldy. When you dig into the pile spores from the molds growing in the pile may move into the air almost like smoke. (Be careful breathing these spores. I have developed quite an allergy to the mold, though only one other staff member at ECHO has reacted to it.) If you leave it too long after it reaches this fluffy stage, the pile shrinks and becomes dense and wet and difficult to work with.

Make the initial bed of grass clippings deeper than what you want to end up with, to allow for shrinkage during the initial preparation and continuing as the bed decays. It might take a foot of fluffy grass clippings to end up with one to two inches after the first cropping season.

Thoroughly wet the pile. Often the clippings do not want to absorb water--even after adding a lot of water, the clippings half an inch below the surface may be dry. If that happens, wet the pile with detergent in the watering can as previously described. While adding water, walk over the bed to compress the fluffy grass as much as possible. We want to end up with plenty of air space, but we also need the bed to be sufficiently dense to have ample moisture in the vicinity of the seed and roots.

Add fertilizer. We add an ordinary garden fertilizer and dolomitic limestone. If it is 10/10/10 fertilizer, we add 5 pounds per 100 square feet. We did not arrive at this amount by careful experiments. It works, but you can do your own experimentation to see if less would work or if more would be better for the fertilizer you use and the materials you are using to make the bed.

As mentioned earlier, the numbers refer to the percent of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium, respectively. If it is 5/5/5, we add twice that amount, etc. Neither the exact numbers nor the exact amounts are that important. There are many other fertilizer formulations on the market. You might only be able to get something like 8/6/10, for example. Don't worry about it. Just avoid extremes like 36/10/10, a very high nitrogen fertilizer used for lawns, or something like 10/0/10 which would be a special purpose formulation completely lacking in phosphorous.

We always use fertilizer with micronutrients (that is elements needed only in minor amounts). If you cannot find that kind of fertilizer but are making the bed from organic materials, the micronutrients that will soon be released by the decaying organic material may be sufficient. One can often buy micronutrient formulations separately and inexpensively. These would be used in small amounts, following directions for a regular garden. Added micronutrients are a must with any system that is not based on fertile soil or organic matter, e.g. sand or gravel.

A quick way of providing these micronutrients, if they are not contained in the fertilizer, is to apply some manure or to water the garden with a manure tea made by soaking a bag of manure in a barrel of water for a few weeks. However, the manure or manure tea may not have ideal ratios of each micronutrient, and might even be totally lacking in one or more. If that happens the plant will develop symptoms of micronutrient deficiencies. Check on the web or in a library to learn what symptoms the deficiencies of various micronutrient look like. Often they involve discolorations of various kinds, e.g. yellow or white leaves, reddish color in veins, etc. You may be able to identify what particular nutrient is lacking and overcome the problem by adding only that one nutrient.

What else can be used to make the bed? Two Examples. Jeff McManus wrote from Bangladesh after reading about rooftop techniques in ECHO Development Notes to tell about how local gardeners grow vegetables in beds on top of the ground made from water hyacinth. Water hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*) is one of the most prolific plants on earth. This floating weed chokes waterways around the world. He wrote that people in Bangladesh clear their ponds and rivers of the floating plants and pile them on the banks. They plant vegetables in the water hyacinth piles and these mounds become “floating gardens” in the monsoon season. The McManus family grows lettuce, papayas, tomatoes, and very productive roses in boxes filled with water hyacinth harvested from nearby nutrient-rich waters. They chop the plants into small pieces, let them compost for two weeks with daily turning, and plant directly in the compost. McManus mixes the compost with a little manure and some wood shavings, but does not add extra fertilizer, since the water hyacinth is an efficient collector of nutrients. The spongy plants hold a lot of water; so very little watering is needed for awhile. The box gardens work best with fresh material; reused compost seems to promote diseases in the plants.

ECHO collaborated in the 1990's with a US NGO, Center for Citizen Initiatives, and Russian colleagues to show what could be done in rooftop gardening in St. Petersburg, Russia. The “shallow bed” gardens we used there were bags of peat that had been used for a few years in a large greenhouse complex. They replace the bags periodically to ensure that they get the highest possible greenhouse yields, so the used bags and peat only cost US\$0.50. We cut the tops off of the bags, added dolomite and fertilizer with micronutrients and had very successful gardens. We also found a useful ingredient to incorporate into rooftop beds that is manufactured in Russia for insulation in buildings but is also used by nurserymen. This man-made product reminded me of lightweight volcanic rock, except that the largest particles were no more than half the size of a pea. Their name for it is “keramzit.” I have seen a similar product in the USA, perhaps manufactured for growing orchids.



The shallow beds can even be made on a sloping roof, as you can see in the photo below.



We had a lot of fun with the sloping roof that you see above. Local TV stations often come to ECHO for a feature story. I suggested to one of them that they broadcast the evening news from the roof of our goat barn. They loved the idea! Intermixed with the weather, top headlines etc. that evening, the station frequently checked back in with the lovely lady reporter. I've put a few of the photos below. (I apologize for the poor image quality.)



Planting in the New Bed.

Planting seeds or transplants into shallow bed gardens made of compost is done as in any other garden. Planting directly into beds of organic material that has not yet decomposed requires some special techniques. Larger seeds like peas or beans can usually be planted directly if the medium is made of a material that packs closely enough together to remain moist most of the day and make close contact with the seed to keep it wet. Seeds must be deep enough into the medium to remain moist but shallow enough to be able to grow to the surface after germination. The top inch or so of many materials, e.g. nearly fresh grass clippings, tend to dry out. You may need to water a few times each day until they germinate. We have also had the opposite problem with older, matted grass clippings, which stayed too wet.

Smaller seeds, like carrots, require compost or soil or something of very similar texture to get started. You can cover the entire bed with compost or soil or just form a 1-2-inch-deep trench in the packed down grass clippings, fill it with compost or soil, and plant in this trench. Even this small amount of compost will provide an environment for the seed and initial roots that is just like they would experience in any garden. A useful technique for germinating carrots in any garden is to place a board on top of the row. This ensures that the top centimeter of the soil remains moist. Look under the board daily until you see the first seeds germinating, then remove it.

Transplanting likewise can demand special care if the medium is not similar in texture to soil. If the bed is made of undecayed plant material that does not pack well, we either cover the top with 1-2 inches of soil/compost or make a small hole, insert the transplant, and fill in around it with several handfuls of compost or soil.

Keep a close watch on the appearance of the vegetables. At the first sign of nutrient deficiency, add a bit more fertilizer. With high-nitrogen materials like grass clippings, this may only need to be done once or twice, or not at all. With low nitrogen materials like wood chips or straw it will be necessary to add fertilizer frequently. A small amount of solid fertilizer can be sprinkled around the plants, taking care not to get it in direct contact with leaves or stems. Our wood chip gardens produce best if they are watered every other day with a solution of soluble fertilizer or manure tea. Most soluble fertilizers are made to pour directly on the leaves (some nutrients can be absorbed through the leaves of some plants). This is especially helpful if a deficiency has already appeared. If possible, have a spray bottle on hand filled with a soluble fertilizer. Use it as “medicine” to spray plants when any deficiency appears. Do NOT spray manure tea onto the plants because they may contain disease microorganisms!

Refurbishing the Shallow Bed--Subsequent Seasons.

You may be surprised at two things: (1) how quickly the depth of the bed drops as the material turns to compost and (2) how quickly beautiful compost is formed. If there is no soil in the beds, just organic material, the material eventually turns deep black and may eventually look something like peat. The bed must be refurbished after harvest whenever it has shrunk to less than the desired depth or has become so dense that it holds too much water and too little air. Alternatively, the bed can be recycled: dismantled and the compost which has formed in it used as the top layer in constructing new beds.

If the bed is still deep enough for another growing season, the only refurbishing needed is to apply fertilizer. Much of the bed, depending on its original composition, may by now have been converted to compost. The bed should not need as much fertilizer as it did when it was first constructed and planted and possibly may not need any addition of fertilizer, depending upon whether the now-decayed organic materials have turned into a good compost that provides all the nutrients needed for healthy plants. This is not a delicate system, like hydroponics, with exacting fertilizer requirements. I trust that any frustration at not finding rigorous details on the amount of fertilizer will be more than compensated by having a bed that allows some flexibility. More fertilizer will be needed if you have heavy rains that leach away nutrients. Learn what each of the vegetables or flowers that you grow look like when they are well grown, then watch for clues about what they may need from time to time. You may be able to find pictures on the Internet of what various nutrient deficiency symptoms look like for the particular plants you are growing

If the original organic material has completely turned to compost, then within one or two growing seasons the bed should be remade. The new bed will be easier to make than it was to make the original bed, because we are now starting with a considerable amount of compost. Rather than layering new organic material, e.g. grass clippings, on top of the bed, it is best to remove the composted material, layer the new undecayed material onto the place where you want the bed, then place the remains of the old bed back on top. We add some fertilizer (less than with a totally new bed) and water.

There are two reasons to refurbish in this way. First, the older material can become so dense that, if left at the bottom of the bed, aeration might be poor. This is not a problem when it is placed on top of the less compact fresh organic material. Second, it is much easier to plant into the composted material than it would be into the fresh material.

How Much Does a Shallow Bed Weigh?

We place great emphasis on developing very lightweight beds for rooftop applications. That is why we normally do not use soil and try to keep the depth to no more than three inches. Individual soil particles typically weigh approximately 2.75 times as much as an equal volume of water. There are spaces between the tiny soil particles, however, which can account for up to 50% of the volume of a good garden soil. It is the worst case (heaviest soil) that concerns us in considering any possible danger to the roof, so we will consider the weight after a drenching rain and assume that every space is filled with water. Such saturated soil weighs 1.9 times as much as an equal volume of water. Individual particles of organic matter typically weigh slightly more than water (1.1 to 1.4 times) and the spaces between them are much more than 50% of volume. So in a worse case, i.e. a totally flooded bed of fully decayed, compact organic matter, the weight would be at most 1.2 times that of water. In most cases, the weight will be almost the same as an equal volume of water.

The weight can still be considerable. This table compares the weight of 3" (7.6 cm) and 8" (20.3 cm) deep beds that are 4 feet wide and 8 feet long (1.22 m x 2.44 m), one with soil and one with well decomposed organic matter, both fully saturated with water.

<u>Depth</u>		<u>Weight</u>		
		well-decomposed organic matter		good garden soil
3"		598 lbs (272 kg)		947 lbs (430kg)
8"		1,595 lbs (725 kg)		2,552 lbs (1,147 kg)

At ECHO we usually have no sides to the gardens in order to keep material cost to a minimum. If cement block sides were used, the weight and cost would be considerably greater. Based on what we have seen, people are often more cautious than necessary.



As you can see in the pictures, some gardeners in Haiti are using concrete blocks for sides and depths equal to the 8 inches of the blocks. No problems have been reported although I saw perhaps only half a dozen gardens. If there is any doubt about safety, remember to put the heaviest items (like a barrel of water) directly over walls.



A Special Adaptation of Shallow Beds: the “Tire Garden”

Construction is simple and elegant and may cost nothing. What we want to end up with is a portable growing container that can be placed anywhere and moved if necessary. The bottom that will hold the potting mix in the container will be a piece of ordinary plastic, e.g. like painters use to keep paint from splattering on the floor. The plastic could even be a thick garbage bag. Lay a tire flat on the ground. Note that the top sidewall is a mirror image of the bottom sidewall. With a knife or machete or large-tooth saw, cut off the top sidewall. Place a piece of plastic inside the tire on the bottom sidewall, large enough so that an inch or two of plastic extends up along the walls of the tire. Now turn the top sidewall that you just cut off upside down and place it inside the tire where it will fit like a glove against the bottom sidewall, holding the plastic firmly in place. If the plastic is trimmed to near the bottom of the tire, the garden will essentially be a portable “shallow bed garden.” If the plastic is left so that a pool of water is formed, it will be more like the “shallow bed in a shallow pool garden” that we will discuss later.

When cutting the plastic sheet that will be held in place by the inverted rim, do not cut too closely. The weight of the soil tends to pull the plastic down somewhat when it is lifted. The plastic might be pulled out from under the rim and the soil could drop out the bottom.

Any suitable soil, compost or potting mix can be used to fill the tire. You will need to judge if fertilizer is needed and when it should be applied, based on what you use for a planting medium and how plants are growing. At ECHO we sometimes place an empty flower pot or a PVC pipe in the center so that we can see how much (if any) water is standing in the bottom and so judge when to water. More often though, we make sure the plastic does not retain too much standing water and we treat it as a straightforward shallow-bed container garden. (The plastic sheet will normally be pushed down a bit by the weight of the growing mix you have selected. So there will usually be at least a modest “pool” of water in the bottom. If for some reason you do not want even that small amount of water standing, just poke a few small holes in the plastic.)

Where weight is of importance, we usually incorporate something with a lot of air space into the planting medium to reduce the weight of the tire garden. Another benefit is that the same amount of planting mix goes farther because of the air spaces, possibly saving money. For example, we often incorporate some soft drink cans with slits cut into the sides right into the growing medium. Roots near the can will always find air available where the slits have been made. In the tropics one could use coconut husks (placed upside down so there are air pockets) or possibly pine cones or very light weight, porous volcanic rocks. An exception would be if the weight of the tire is not of importance because it will be positioned on solid ground or on a cement slab, you do not anticipate needing to move it, and the cost of the growing medium is not an issue.

The tire gardens are the “jeep” of above-ground gardening methods: portable gardens that can literally go almost anywhere. On a trip to El Salvador I met with some potential rooftop gardeners in the capital city, San Salvador. After showing how to construct the garden, it was fun watching as their imaginations led them to move a tire garden to unlikely places for a garden: on a flat rock, on a steep hillside supported on the downhill side with rocks, on the roots under a tree, on a pile of rock or a junked car.



If there is danger of theft or damage by chickens and goats, the tire can be placed on top of something, even along the edge of the tin roof of a shanty. People often put pieces of iron or other heavy items on the roof of a shanty to keep it from blowing away. They do this because there is not enough framing to adequately secure the corrugated roofing. A few tire gardens might even help the roof stay in place.

The tire garden can be moved if necessary as seasons change. A growing vegetable may need to be moved where there is more sun or less sun or where there is less wind. If the garden is on a rooftop, it can be placed on sticks or stones so that air can circulate underneath, keeping the roof surface dry. If gardeners themselves have to relocate, they can take their gardens and their improved soil to their new home. When ECHO staff member Dan Holcombe (in picture) returned from his vacation to the church in Mexico City where he had a rooftop tire garden, he found it flourishing—on a different building.

The church moved it in order to add a second story to their original building. Workers simply parked a pickup truck by the first building; the tires were handed down to men standing in the truck and then relocated to the roof of a second building.



Advantages of “Tire Gardens”

There is less potential to damage the roof. Though the shallow bed garden can be constructed easily on any sturdy flat rooftop, there are situations where this causes concern. Some cement rooftops may have small cracks. There is fear that because of the constant moisture and fertilizer beneath the garden, roots will begin to grow into the cracks. Nature shows us how this process can even break rocks as the roots expand.

For this reason, when presented with a range of possible garden construction methods for rooftops, many citizens in developing countries will chose the tire garden. The tire can be placed on three or four sticks, rocks or other items so that there is considerable air space beneath the tire. This allows the air to circulate and eliminates constant dampness. Also there is no contact of the roots with the rooftop itself. (See arrows in photo)

You can also make a tire garden with a handle. Note that they are turning the tire inside-out. See the three photos below.



Summary: Shallow Bed Gardens

In summary, Shallow Bed gardens or hybrid gardens that include a shallow bed, are the most foolproof of the methods we have tried. Especially when made of compost, it differs little from gardening in the soil. The main differences are its need for frequent watering and that it's limited depth permits only shallow roots (to which plants show a surprising ability to adapt). The ability to grow vegetables in fresh organic material while it is being turned to compost is a very attractive feature of the method.

One might be tempted to think that the need to water frequently would not be a problem if the garden belonged to an unemployed person who presumably had a lot of time on his or her hands. However, the limited feedback I have received suggests that human nature and demands on time even of an unemployed person are such that the likelihood of a gardening project succeeding is much greater if watering needs are less frequent than may be required for shallow bed gardening. That is especially true when the garden is located on a rooftop that may be difficult to climb on to. This leads us to the benefits of the next gardening method that we call "wick gardens.

The Wick Garden

The wick garden was developed to enable people to have exceptionally shallow bed gardens without the need to water several times each day. Pat Lahr, the missionary working with rooftop gardening that I mentioned in the introduction, first got me thinking about using wicks for this purpose when I visited his rooftop garden in Haiti in the late 1980's.

You are most likely to think of a candle or lantern when you think of a wick, where kerosene or melted wax are pulled by capillary action up the wick from the pool of liquid below.

Water is likewise moved by capillary action if a cloth or fiber wick is placed in it. For example, if you are wearing blue jeans and stand motionless in a quiet pool of water that comes to your knees, the water will slowly move up the leg of your pants well above the level of water in the pool.

The wick for the garden can be any kind of cloth. For example, the wick might be an old blanket, pieces cut from old clothing, a piece of carpet or a special fabric made for this purpose that is used in greenhouses to keep the soil in small pots moist until they are ready for sale. The garden can make use of (1) a vertical wick to move water upwards as in the example above of a person standing in a pool or (2) a horizontal wick, which is a piece of cloth lying on a flat surface, to move water that is placed on one spot toward all corners of the wick.

How thick does the wick need to be? We have found that very thin pieces of cloth may not be able to deliver enough water to areas farther from the buckets, especially on a sunny and windy day or after the plants have developed a considerable leaf area. Using the analogy of the wick as an irrigation pipe, a thin wick is like a small diameter irrigation pipe. Thick wicks or large diameter irrigation pipes can deliver more water at a faster rate. If the thickness of the wick seems to be a problem, you can try doubling it over to make it twice as thick with twice the water moving capacity or choosing a thicker piece of cloth.

Applications using Horizontal Wicks

Imagine that you have cut an old bedspread to the dimensions common for garden beds (let's say 4x12 feet) and have laid it on a cement slab. You have purchased some cabbage and lettuce plants in 4-inch pots and wish to grow them on this piece of cloth. What needs to happen for this bedspread to become a productive garden?

All you need to do is make sure that you meet the requirements for healthy root growth that we discussed earlier.

Air Whether the roots grow on top of, under or within the tablecloth, there is certain to be air. You could not keep air from any of those places even if you were determined to do so. You need to nothing further to ensure an abundance of air.

Nutrients You need to add nutrients either directly onto the cloth wick or dissolved in the water that you supply. You can save money by sprinkling directly onto the wick an "initial charge" of dolomite (dolomitic limestone), some ordinary garden fertilizer, and a small amount of a micronutrient mix. (Commercial growers with expensive greenhouses might choose to use more expensive chemicals that dissolve in the water. But these tend to be quite expensive.)

Water-soluble fertilizers cost much more to manufacture because special ingredients are needed to make sure they do not react with each other and become insoluble.

An added advantage of having this "initial charge" of fertilizers is that they are less likely to be washed away by rain than soluble fertilizers. An inch of rain will wash away most soluble fertilizer that is in the bed, but this initial charge of ordinary fertilizer and dolomitic limestone will release nutrients for several days or weeks, or months if you buy what is called a "slow release" fertilizer. Slow release fertilizers are prepared with special techniques that cause the nutrients to dissolve little by little over a long time. This is a great advantage where there is no soil to help hold on to the nutrients, but they are quite expensive and not available in all parts of the world. In the United States one widely available slow release fertilizer is sold in gardening stores under the name of Osmocote

Every time you water the garden, to every gallon of water dissolve between 1-3 teaspoons of a soluble fertilizer with micronutrients that has been manufactured for soil-less gardening. If the plants seem to not be doing as well as you would expect with a teaspoon (5 ml) of fertilizer per gallon, then begin using higher concentrations. Every gardener needs to learn to “read” the health of the garden. This comes with experience.

Water: You must either frequently sprinkle water on the tablecloth or find some other way to keep it continually wet. Unless you have so much time available that you can water the garden, without fail, several times each day, then you need to find a way to automate some of the watering chores. But remember that we are trying to make sure our gardens are not dependent on expensive techniques that require technology and reliable electricity.

This can be achieved by installing a very low technology system that will slowly release water to the wick as it is used up. Purchase some five-gallon buckets that have tightly fitting lids. I find that one bucket per 16 square feet is about right. Or go to a business that buys a lot of liquids in five-gallon buckets and might be willing to give the empty ones to you. For example, bakeries often buy jelly or cream fillings in such buckets. Painters or plasterers discard dozens of five-gallon buckets on every job

Drill a single 3/8-inch (0.95cm) hole in each lid. The hole should be located roughly an inch (2.5cm) from the side of the lid. The bucket is filled water that contains about a tablespoon of soluble fertilizer. You may purchase one of the soluble fertilizers sold to homeowners at garden centers, at farm supply stores for injection into irrigation systems, or at greenhouse supply houses for hydroponic vegetable production.

The Wick Garden consists of a piece of polyester or other synthetic cloth (the "wick") laid out on a flat area in the shape of the desired garden and a five-gallon watering bucket placed directly on the wick. The root balls (the roots and soil attached to plants in their starting containers) of transplants are placed directly on the wick. The beds are then filled in around the plants to a depth of three to six inches with lightweight material that will keep the sun and wind from the wick and will give some support to the plants. Examples would be pine needles, pieces of coconut husk, or even soft drink cans. It is important that this material be something that will not become waterlogged. A space is left on the cloth to hold the bucket. The wicking action of the cloth spreads water and nutrients to the roots, which grow above and below the surface of the cloth. Best results are achieved with short or trailing vegetables and herbs, such as tomatoes, onions, radishes, lettuce or mint.

Place the buckets where you want them, but try to spread them around on the bed to help ensure even distribution of water. You might make a small barrier around the spot where

the buckets are to sit in order to keep materials you will soon be adding from falling onto that spot while you are refilling the buckets. (If anything falls onto the space where the rim of the bucket is to sit, it might allow air into the space under the bucket causing a constant flow of water out of the bucket. The bucket system relies on the buildup of a vacuum inside the bucket.) At ECHO we have used bricks or constructed a very simple barrier from wood or bamboo, but if the bed is made from materials that tend to stay in place, e.g. pine needles, this is not necessary.

Can manure tea be placed in the bucket as the source of fertilizer? Many people ask that. Could manure tea be the basis for a completely organic hydroponic system? Because the wick garden is based on subsurface irrigation via the wick, the tea would spread the nutrients directly to the roots, thus avoiding microbial contamination of aboveground parts of the plant.

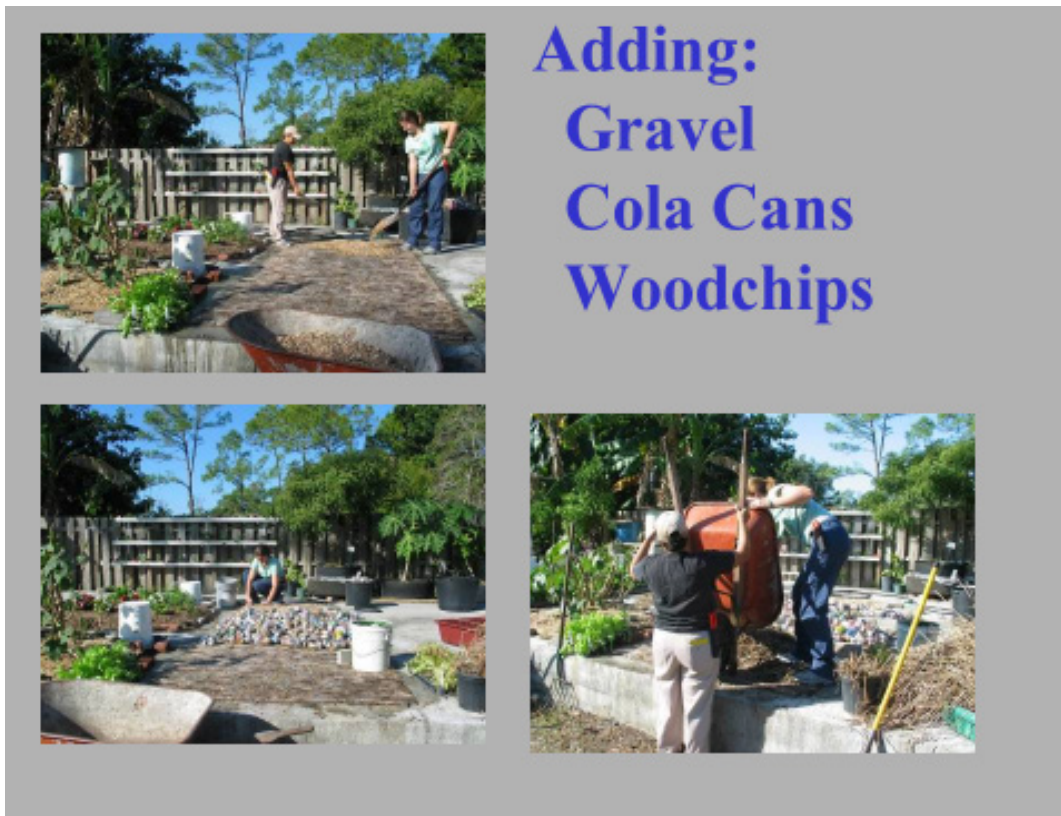
As a supplement, manure tea has value. You could add the initial fertilizers to the wick and then distribute manure tea through the bucket. You will have trouble with the 3/8-inch hole plugging up if sediment ends up in the tea. The bed could then quickly dry out. So keep a watchful eye on the system till you learn how it performs. If the vegetable is a tall plant where hand watering with manure tea would not put it in touch with the edible parts, then you could use a watering can.

Based on our limited experience, I believe it would be very difficult to provide all the needed nutrients in the right ratios based only on a manure tea. That is not to say that you could not come up with a process and formula that would work, at least for some crops. You would need to settle on a manure source that was uniform over time. For example, horse manure, chicken manure and cow manure differ greatly in composition. Old manure will differ from new manure. Seasonal differences that affect temperature will affect the mix of microorganisms and how rapidly they work. The nature of the feed the animal eats will affect the nutrient content of the manure and hence of the tea. It would be very difficult to develop a formula that many individual gardeners could use and get uniform results in vegetable production.

Keep the sun and wind from drying the cloth and damaging the roots. Roots that start to grow on top of the wick will likely be damaged by the direct sun. Furthermore, a wick in full sun that is kept wet with water that contains all the nutrients necessary for plant growth will quickly become covered by a green growth of algae. This will be unattractive, use up a lot of the nutrients, and will take a lot more watering because the sun and wind evaporate the water so much more quickly. A final problem is that if there are salts in your water, for example if the water is hard, these will be left behind along with any unused fertilizer when the water evaporates. This can build up and become harmful to the plants.

So you need to cover the wick with something, almost anything that isn't toxic, that allows constant exposure of the roots to air, keeps the sun and wind off of the cloth and keeps the sun from damaging the roots that will emerge. ECHO has used things like pine needles, gravel, woodchips, recycled soft drink cans, or corncobs. Almost anything can do because the only purpose is to keep the sun and wind from the wick and perhaps to provide a little support—you could even use a pile of old shoes!

Pieces of old carpet make a great wick. The photo shows a wick garden made from a 4 by 12-foot (1.2 x 3.7m) piece of old carpet. We divided the bed into thirds and used a different material to cover each third to see which ones worked best. Here we used woodchips, cola cans and gravel. You can see the results in the photos to follow.



Planting the Wick Garden. This system works best if plants are transplanted rather than direct seeded. The basic problem seems to be that a seed sitting on a wet piece of cloth may not have sufficient contact to absorb the water needed for good germination. Very small seeds, such as lettuce, would be more likely to germinate than a large seed, such as a bean. We hope to do more experimenting with direct seeding. You might try placing a very small amount of soil over the seed or plant larger seeds in a small mound of soil that you place in the spot where the plant is wanted.



Thoroughly wet down the wick and whatever material is now covering the wick before transplanting onto it. Determine where you want to place each plant. Remove the first plant from the container. At the spot where you want the first plant, move the covering material aside so that enough of the wet wick is exposed that you can place the rootball in tight contact with the wick. Sometimes I gently push the bottom edges slightly outward to obtain even more contact between the rootball and the wick. Good rootball/wick contact is very important.

Until new roots start to grow, the only water the rootball will receive is that pulled from the wick by capillary action. Gently replace the covering material around and a little above the rootball so that the sun and wind do not dry out either the wick or the rootball. Continue until the entire garden is planted.



Note where the roots of the tomato plant are growing on the wick and under the pine needles



Instead of pine needles, the marigold is growing on cloth covered with crushed soft drink cans

Watering the Wick Garden.

Having planted the wick garden, now fill each of the five-gallon buckets with water that has 1-3 teaspoons of soluble fertilizer dissolved in each gallon. Place the lid into which you previously drilled the 3/8-inch hole tightly on the bucket, turn the bucket upside down and set it on the wick. At ECHO we usually place three buckets in a garden this size, i.e. 4 X 12 feet, one bucket for every 4 feet. If you have more buckets you will need to refill them less frequently

Water immediately begins to trickle from the hole and onto the wick. Wicking action (movement of water caused by capillary action) moves the water from under the bucket and continues to move it toward the edges of the garden. The cloth wick acts like an irrigation pipe, distributing water and nutrients over the entire area of the wick.

Why doesn't all the water run out of the bucket and off of the wick? The answer is that when the wick becomes thoroughly wet around the rim of the upside down bucket an essentially airtight seal develops between the edge of the bucket lid and the wick. A vacuum builds up as more and more water leaves the bucket but is not replaced by air bubbling into the bucket through the small hole in the lid. The vacuum eventually becomes strong enough to support the weight of the water and prevent any more water from flowing through the hole.

Anyone who has watered chickens or a pet bird is familiar with this principle. For example, a jar of water with a hole in the lid can be placed upside down in a bowl with one side slightly raised by setting it on a small object. Water will rather quickly run from the jar until it fills enough of the bowl that there is no access for air to enter the jar. A little more runs out until the vacuum stops it. As the chickens drink from the bowl the water level drops and allows a few bubbles of air to enter the jar, reducing the vacuum enough that some water can again flow into the bowl and replace what the chickens drank.

How often do you need to refill the bucket? That is one of most frequently asked questions and the answer must be vague. If the surface is flat so that no water flows off of the wick due to gravity, and if there is a good covering of the wick so that it does not evaporate, then the only way water leaves is when it is taken up by the roots. Some of that water will become part of the plant, but a great deal of it is evaporated into the air through the leaves. The amount that evaporates depends upon the leaf area, the kind of plant, the temperature, the humidity and wind speed (water evaporates faster when the humidity is low and wind is high), the degree of cloudiness, and intensity of the sun. (At ECHO the sun is almost overhead in June but at roughly 40 degrees from the horizon in December.) Finally, the species of vegetable being grown makes a difference. Plants that tend to be drought resistant that originated in semi-arid regions have mechanisms that reduce the loss of water through the leaves. Other vegetables have little such ability and can wilt quickly. You can always supplement the bucket irrigation system by sprinkling water directly over the bed at any time.

As with so many other aspects of gardening, there is no substitute for an alert gardener who responds to the needs of the plants. Remember that there is really very little water held by the wick. If the buckets run dry, the vegetables you are growing tend to wilt easily. So if conditions favor rapid loss of water through the leaves, then you need to refill the buckets soon after they empty and perhaps use slightly less soluble fertilizer. If this is not possible, then consider adding another bucket. Be aware that some plants may develop so much leaf area, for example pumpkins that vine several feet away from the bed, that

watering becomes overwhelming. In such cases a wick garden is not a good system for growing those plants. Try one of our other recommended bed designs that have a greater water-holding capacity.

Why does the wick garden work best during drier periods? As you can well imagine, an inch or so of rain can quickly wash away nearly all the dissolved nutrients when the garden is only a piece of cloth. So the wick method is best suited for gardening during seasons when rains are infrequent. Alternatively, you could cover the area with a plastic rain shield of some sort. At any time of year, if it rains enough that you believe the nutrients may have washed away, you should replace them. All you need do is dissolve some hydroponic fertilizer in a watering can and sprinkle it over the wick. This is even more important if it rains several days in a row. That is because the hydroponic solution in the bucket only drains out when the wick begins to dry up. If the wick does not dry out for several days, the bucket may not be of much help, leaving plant roots only with water and air but few or no nutrients.

If you recently placed some of the less expensive field and garden fertilizer on the wick, it is likely that nutrients will continue to slowly dissolve and become available to plants. If by any chance you placed some of the far more expensive “slow-release fertilizer” pellets on the bed, they may release nutrients slowly over a period of six months or so. The deliberately slow-to-release nutrients may not provide enough for optimal plant growth during the rainy season.

The Portable Wick Bed



We have only tried this method experimentally at ECHO. The idea is to construct a very light weight portable palate with a wick garden on top. The portable garden, perhaps planted with an assortment of herbs, could be kept safely near the urban house at night and carried to the street the next day to sell absolutely fresh herbs to passers-by. Do let us know your experience if you try out this technique.

The Shallow Pool Garden

Daily watering required by shallow pool gardens can be a problem. Pat Lahr, the “rooftop garden missionary” in Haiti that I mentioned previously, showed me several years ago how to use a five-gallon bucket to maintain a constant level of water in a shallow pool.

He used a principle that farmers have used for decades to automatically water animals. As we discussed in the section on wick gardens, only so much water can flow through a small hole in a closed container if there is no way for air to bubble in through the hole to replace the water. Without the bubbles, a vacuum builds inside the container and the water flow ceases until something happens that allows another air bubble to enter.

As with the wick gardening system, a 3/8” hole is drilled in the lid (one inch from the edge) of a five-gallon bucket. The bucket is filled with water and placed upside down in the pool of water. The water can have a complete hydroponic fertilizer dissolved in it if desired. **The side of the lid nearest the hole is placed on a stick just thick enough to provide the desired depth of water.** Water flows from the bucket until the pool of water rises to the point that air can no longer get under the lid and into the bucket and a vacuum builds up. When the pool level drops enough to allow a few bubbles of air into the bucket, more water flows into the pool. This ensures a continual, shallow pool of water

Two more things are needed if the shallow pool is to be used to grow plants. **First**, it is essential to keep the sun, the wind and mosquitoes from the water surface. The sunlight would damage the roots if it struck them directly. The sun and wind combined would rapidly evaporate the water and increase the concentration in the remaining water of salts (from the water source or from added fertilizer). The water would become dark green with algae growth (which would compete with plants for fertilizer). Mosquitoes would breed in the water, potentially causing the number of mosquitoes and mosquito-born diseases to increase. **Second**, it is necessary to provide some support for the plants.

In ECHO’s first attempt at building a shallow-pool, we used a six-inch layer of pine needles and hydroponic solution to grow an okra plant in a four-foot square shallow pool garden. Naturally, this did not provide much support for the okra plant and it fell over when it was two feet tall. However, with the main stem now lying firmly across and on the top of the pine needles, it was better able to provide support for the new shoots that quickly sprouted and grew from several points along the stem. The development of a substantial root mass added to the stability. The okra plant grew into an exceptionally large, bushy and productive okra plant that did not fall over again. Incredibly, we found that the leaves transpired five gallons of water on a hot summer day. The production of okra pods was incredible.

The Shallow Pool Garden consists of a shallow pool of water one half to one inch deep. Usually a sheet of plastic of the desired size is formed into a pool by laying sticks under each of the sides. This is then filled with some material that will not become waterlogged, extending at least 2" above the water line. The length of time between waterings can be extended by using a watering bucket. [To make a watering bucket, drill a 3/8" hole into the tight-fitting lid of a 5-gallon plastic bucket, about 1 inch from the edge of the lid. Fill the bucket with water (optionally containing a soluble fertilizer) and place it upside down in a cleared spot in the "pool."] Place a stick under the bucket lid at the point nearest the hole to allow air to enter under the bucket. This results in a constant shallow pool of nutrient solution in the bed, the depth of which is determined by how much the stick raises the edge of the bucket. Note that this differs from the use of the bucket in watering a wick garden in that if a stick were placed under the bucket in a wick garden no vacuum would develop and all water would flow from the bucket.

Shallow Pool Garden



Other material that might be used instead of pine needles include gravel, coconut husks or any recycled material that will provide some support, has a lot of air space, protects the water from sun, wind and at least limits access by mosquitoes. We have had very satisfactory results with some vegetables using soft drink cans placed in a pile six to nine inches deep in the pool of water.

Our best results with shallow pools, however, are using them in combination with the other two major methods, shallow beds and wick gardens. We will now take a look at some of these "hybrid" gardens

Chapter 3. Hybrids of the Basic Three Methods

Hybrids of the Shallow Bed on Top of a Wick

Introduction

Ideally I like to be as close to nature as possible. I envision that a seed germinating in a bed of compost, even if it is only an inch deep, “feels” like it is in just the perfect environment to start its life. All of the essential nutrients, water, and air are available to the germinating seed, and it is surrounded by dark soil.

You can get the best of both hydroponic systems (minus the commercial fertilizer) and organic gardening methods by combining elements of both techniques. The photo shows radishes, lettuce and onions growing in a one-inch bed of compost on top of a piece of cloth (the wick). The plants were seeded directly into the compost. The roots adapted easily to the shallow bed. The cloth kept the shallow bed constantly moist as it moved water from the bucket to the farthest corners of the bed.



An old carpet is an ideal wick. Placing a shallow bed on top of an old piece of carpet makes one of our best performing hybrid gardening systems. We discussed the carpet garden in the section on wick gardens. You will recall that the thickness of the carpet allows good and fast distribution of water from the bucket. In this hybrid method, the compost or organic potting mix in which the roots grow

makes it less vulnerable to nutrient deficiencies because the nutrients are slowly released as microbial action proceeds. Also the hybrid bed has a greater water-holding capacity.

Hybrids of the Wick in a Shallow Pool—going up instead of out

Note: during a heavy rainy season, the methods that we discuss, here or elsewhere, that do not contain soil may not work well. That is because the rain water can wash the nutrients out of the container more quickly and thoroughly than if it were filled with ordinary soil. These methods work much better during the dry season or under cover.

The soft drink can, old sock garden.

Our first soft drink can, old sock garden started out as something like a Mr. Wizard science experiment to help people think creatively about what a plant requires to thrive. It turned out to be a very good gardening method for smaller plants.

Take any container that has drainage holes about two inches up the sides. I normally use plastic cement-mixing trays that can be purchased at any hardware store in the USA and probably in many other countries. But the container could be any shape and made from anything as long as it has sides and no holes in the bottom, so that you can create a pool containing water and nutrients. For example, an old tire or wooden box with plastic in the bottom would work. The pool forms the reservoir for water and nutrients.



I imagine that most people have old socks that are mismatched or that have holes in them. Soft drink cans fit easily into the socks, one to three cans per sock depending on the size of the sock





First place an empty flowerpot or other container in the center of the pool. This will be the “monitoring well.” A quick glance into the empty pot will show the water level in the container. It also is a convenient place to quickly add water to the garden. Then cover the bottom with the can-filled socks, fitting them closely together. You will need to have a few socks that hold only one or two cans to fit around the monitoring well.

Give the garden an initial “charge” of fertilizer made for gardens or farms. I do this by sprinkling two tablespoonfuls of fertilizer with micronutrients and one tablespoon of dolomitic limestone across the socks. (If you do not have access to dolomitic lime, then use regular lime and Epsom salts, as discussed earlier). Then make a second layer of cans/socks and add the same nutrients to this layer. If there is room, make a third layer. As discussed regarding earlier methods, you could try watering with manure tea as a supplemental nutrient boost, but I do not recommend relying on manure tea totally because its nutritional value can differ from one source of manure to another and from one technique to another for soaking the manure in water.

Add water until it is full up to the drainage holes of the container. I put a tablespoon of hydroponic fertilizer in each gallon of water on the first fill because it may take a while for the fertilizer nutrients to be solubilized. The first layer of socks soon becomes totally wet as capillary action moves water from the pool. The water then moves on to the next layer of socks etc. The end result is that the roots have abundant spaces filled with air, a constant supply of water, and a constant supply of nutrients. In subsequent waterings you can just add water sometimes and water with dissolved fertilizer at other times, depending on how you perceive the plants are doing.

You can now plant the garden by transplanting flowers or vegetables. Bend the cans as needed to “snuggle” the rootball into the space between the socks. Create as much contact between the rootball and the socks as you can so that water and nutrients are easily transferred into the roots and so roots can quickly start growing through the socks. **Cover with a mulch of some sort to keep the sun and wind from drying out the socks.** I normally use wood chips, but use whatever is convenient. The photo shows a



cement-mixing tray with a bed of can-filled socks planted with six transplanted annual flowers (impatiens). The roots grow in, under and through the socks and around the cans. Sometimes I cut slits in the cans with a penknife so that roots can have access to air in the cans, but I’m not convinced that it makes much of a difference. (See photo above taken after harvest.)

If you prefer to start the garden by planting seeds, first form a one-half to one-inch layer of potting soil or compost on top of the socks. Then plant the seeds as you would in any garden.

Another approach you might consider is what I call a “lasagna” garden, made of layers of Styrofoam packing material and old clothing.

You could fill the socks with other materials, e.g. pinecones, gravel or even Styrofoam packing material (called “packing peanuts” in the USA). I found that the electrostatic charge that builds up on the Styrofoam makes it difficult to fill the socks. This led me to consider making the garden from layers of cloth instead of socks. The result was an easier and perhaps even better method that I call the “lasagna garden,” so-called after the famous Italian food made from alternating layers of wide noodles with hamburger made from ground beef (minus the cheese and tomato sauce of course!).

In the United States and I'm sure in many other countries, items that are purchased through the mail often come surrounded inside the box with very light weight packing material made from Styrofoam plastic that is shaped much like a peanut shell. They can become a disposal problem, so recycling them into a great growing medium is very attractive. (I imagine that real peanut shells might work just as well in this method, though they would eventually rot. I have never had enough peanut shells to give real peanut shells a try.)

I was a visiting teacher at another organization for a few days and their farm manager and I decided to show the students how to make this lasagna garden. He had accumulated a good quantity of recycled packing beads in anticipation. The students made the demonstration garden and added the water expectantly, only to see it all collapse to the bottom. We had not realized that green packing beads are biodegradable! The water quickly turned them into mush.

Begin making the layered garden by selecting some container with no drainage holes in the bottom. Make your own drainage holes two or more inches up the sides. Lay a piece of cloth across the bottom and extending up one or more sides. Cloth made from man-made fibers work much better in the long term because they do not decompose. Microorganisms will attack natural fabrics such as cotton or wool, causing them to rot and disappear within one or two growing seasons. Place roughly an inch of Styrofoam packing "peanuts" on the cloth, then lay the cloth, which you had left extending up the sides, over onto the "peanuts". It may cover all of the "peanuts" or just part of them. Now place another piece of cloth across the "peanuts" so that they are completely covered. In order to assure that all pieces of cloth are continuously wet, there should be a considerable area of contact between any piece of cloth and one or more of the other pieces. The close contact is important because water being wicked (drawn up) from the pool at the bottom must be transferred from one piece of cloth to another until it reaches the top.

When the container is about a third full, sprinkle some regular fertilizer with micronutrients and some dolomitic limestone (dolomite) on top the cloth. If you have an organic fertilizer that you have confidence in, give that a try instead of chemical fertilizer. Add another inch or so of "peanuts" then sprinkle more of the fertilizer and dolomite. Finish filling to the top, then once again add fertilizer and dolomite.

You may now transplant directly into the bed. Be sure that there is good initial contact between the root ball and the cloth. Move the pieces of cloth and "peanuts," cut holes in the cloth, or whatever you need to do to position the root ball into good contact with the unusual "planting mix" where it will now live. Add some small pieces of cloth around the rootball if necessary to achieve this close contact. Place a mulch, for example wood chips, grass clippings or rice hulls, on top to keep the sun and wind from drying out the cloth and causing an accumulation of salts near the top (from salts in the irrigation water and from added nutrients).

Water the container well from the top with a solution of hydroponic (i.e. soluble) fertilizer or perhaps a manure tea. Continue until you have added enough that the water starts to drain from the holes on the side of the container. Eventually the less expensive solid garden fertilizer and dolomite will start to release nutrients, but the initial watering with soluble fertilizer ensures that the roots will encounter air, water and nutrients right from the start, wherever they are or grow into.

As the plants continue to grow you can sometimes add water without nutrients. Just remember that whether you (or rainfall) does it, some of the dissolved nutrients will be moved toward the bottom of the container and possibly will run out of the drainage holes on the side.

As the roots pull water from the cloth the nutrients will start to move back up as capillary action pulls the water from the bottom back to the top. But if you watered every day, or it rained every day, and the cloth never dried out, the nutrients would not get a chance to cycle back to the top. After a lot of rain, even though the reservoir may be full and the cloth is surely wet, add enough water with soluble nutrients that the roots will be sure to be surrounded with everything that they need for good growth. Ideally the container will alternate from having a full reservoir of water and nutrients to having the reservoir nearly empty.

As was the case with the sock/soft drink can garden, you can cover the top with perhaps an inch of good soil, compost or commercial potting mix and plant seeds directly into this. This would be the best approach if you would like to use the method but wanted to make it an organic garden.

I have found with both the sock/soft drink can garden and the Styrofoam packing “peanut” garden that some annual flowers that would typically die during Florida’s hot, humid subtropical rainy season may survive. Sometimes both geraniums and impatiens survived and got the autumn season off to a display of color without the usual wait of a few months for new transplants to grow. I attribute this to having started with a growing medium that contains no insects, nematodes or disease organisms and that there is a constant water supply, an enormous amount of air surrounding the roots, and the likelihood that many soil-born disease organisms, should they find their way to the bed, do not thrive in this well-aerated environment.

Hybrids of the Shallow Bed in a Shallow Pool

Results are more reliable the closer you come to making a normal garden. Today our shallow pool gardens are basically hybrids made by placing shallow bed gardens right into the pool of water and extending at least two to six inches above the maximum water level.

The roots of most food plants and flowers require plenty of air to thrive. You may have heard it said that "more houseplants are killed by over watering than by under watering." The problem with over watering is not that the roots do not like to stay moist, but that if heavily watered, water fills most of the spaces ordinarily filled by air in dry soil. So if you filled the shallow pool with heavy clay, it might remain so moist that few vegetable plants would grow for lack of air. Rice, water chestnuts and cattails would thrive. (We have nothing but sand here in Florida, so have never been able to try a clay soil.)

There is an element of artistry involved in creating the medium in which the plants will grow when the bed is sitting in water. You need to create a medium with such large air spaces that no matter how much water is around, the roots will still find plenty of air, but dense enough that water in the pool can move up by capillary action and keep the medium moist. One way to achieve good aeration where commercial horticultural supplies are available is to include perlite in the growing medium. Perlite is a special inorganic material sold to make potting mixes very airy. Vermiculite, another commercial amendment for potting mixes, does not work as well because it packs closer together, but would be of some use. One formula we frequently use is called the "Cornell mix," so named because it was developed at Cornell University. The Cornell mix contains one-third perlite, one-third peat moss and one-third vermiculite. In many gardening situations in developing countries, perlite is too expensive to consider, but you can come up with alternatives, perhaps rice hulls.

If you have compost or any mix that has a lot of small air spaces, it may work well with most plants. A good way to create air spaces is to incorporate small particles of either organic or inorganic material. We have found that it works well to have a layer of inorganic material that will not decay placed in the pool itself. This might include materials such as sand, small gravel, small pieces of lightweight volcanic rock, or even cola cans with slits cut in the sides to allow roots to get inside. Cover this with small pieces of fresh organic matter (pieces of coconut husk, corn cobs, rice hulls, weeds, wood chips). Finally, we place a layer of compost on top. In such a mix, roots will always be able to find air even right at water level.

In the Shallow Pool garden, variations in the volume available for air roots seems to be a limiting factor for larger plants. Most larger vegetables only produce well with at least three inches of soil above the water level, although okra is an exception. It seems to be very adaptable to and forgiving of any of these systems, even suspended just above the water in a pile of pine needles! When we finally pulled out the single okra plant in a four square foot shallow pool we found a dense one-inch thick mat of roots.)

There is one other step in the above description that will improve performance. We have found that all these large air spaces can be so effective that there may not be enough connections left to pull water by capillary action up to the top of the bed. The result is that the beds must be hand-watered from above until new plants develop roots deep enough

to reach the water near the bottom. Including spaces where “columns” of compost or soil extend clear into the base of the pool can solve this problem because capillary action will then move water to the top of the garden via these columns. Newly planted beds should probably still be supplemented with hand watering until seedlings have a good start. Why do we recommend using inorganic material in the pool itself? In our first version we did use all organic materials. The bed of pole beans did quite well—until the bottom material rotted and the level of the bed dropped. When this happened, many of the roots ended up in standing water. As discussed above, this is harmful or even fatal for the plant. With decay-resistant materials like cans or coconut husk pieces incorporated into the bed, extending well above the water level, the bed can never sink into the pool.

The Wading Pool Garden

An "appropriate technology" shallow pool garden can be made in the USA and I'm sure elsewhere too from the inexpensive plastic wading pools sold for children. I am talking about wadding pools made from a single rigid piece of plastic, not the kind that is inflatable. The drainage holes would quickly destroy the latter! I recognize that this might not be affordable or available in some locations, but will be in some others, e.g. in larger cities.

Make drainage holes three inches up the sides so the garden can accumulate a significant reservoir of water. Formerly we used a depth of one inch, but less frequent watering is needed with the deeper reservoir. Also tree roots managed to find the lower drainage holes and ended up growing in the garden itself. The roots got in as the lawn was mowed and grass accumulated around one or more holes allowing access. At other times ants built a small mound near one of the holes allowing the roots access.

It is important to paint the wading pool for two reasons. (1) It will become brittle after a year or more in the tropical or subtropical sun. Manufacturers of plastic sometimes include ultra violet light inhibitors to keep the plastic from becoming brittle, but apparently little or none of these inhibitors have been added to the plastic used in wading pools sold in the

You only need paint the outside, the lip and down as far inside the pool as the anticipated soil level.
The parts the sun does not strike will not be harmed and also will not be visible once the pool is filled.

USA. (2) Because most kinds of paint will not stick directly on the plastic, it is necessary to first paint the pool with a “primer/undercoat.” You can inquire at your paint store what primer would stick to slick plastic. (3) After a coat of paint (I chose a redwood color) you have an elegant, circular raised bed garden container ready to fill with a growing medium and plant with vegetables, herbs or flowers.) Place an empty one-gallon flowerpot on the bottom of the pool, near the center, as a “monitoring well.” A quick glance inside the pot will always allows you to see the water level and judge when to add more.

What if wading pools are not for sale or are not affordable where you will be working? A

ground-level shallow pool garden could be constructed with a rim of rocks, or even soil, covered with a sheet of plastic. If elevated, wooden boxes lined with plastic can be used. To keep costs to a minimum, the tire gardens constructed to retain a shallow pool of water would seem to be the most durable and inexpensive.

(The hardware store where you buy the eave troughs may call them gutters. I prefer to think of Eve in the garden rather than a drunk in the gutter!)

The Eave Trough Garden

Visitors are struck by a variation of the hybrid shallow bed in a shallow pool that we call “an eave trough garden.” It lends itself to an easy method for making a striking wall of flowers. This technique is very appropriate any place where eave troughs are sold. Eave troughs are sold to divert water as it runs off of a roof. They typically come in 10-foot lengths in the United States. I buy plastic rather than metal troughs for their lasting color and because it is easy to cut them. A 10-foot eave trough garden is very difficult to move once it is planted, so I cut them in two to make two five-foot troughs.

First the five-foot eave trough must be turned into a shallow pool. You can make a water tight one-half to one-inch barrier (or dam) by moving a caulking gun back and forth at each end while gently squeezing out caulking to form the “dam.” Caulking guns and tubes of caulking are widely available to fill in around a bathtub or window. You should smooth out the “dam” with your thumb and first finger. This will go much more smoothly if you frequently wet your fingers because otherwise it is sticky and clings to your fingers and does not lead to a smooth dam.

Remember to allow a day for it to dry before adding planting medium. If the eave trough is made from aluminum rather than plastic, you can use caulking or alternatively bend the aluminum in such a way as to hold the reservoir of water. You will find it more difficult to cut into neat 5 foot lengths.

The trough is then filled with planting medium as in the shallow pool garden. Make two “monitoring wells” instead of one by placing an empty 4-inch pot at one-third and another at two-thirds of the length of the trough. You will use these to add water as well as to monitor the water level, if any, remaining in the bottom of the pool. To keep the planting medium from washing out at the ends, fill two 4-inch pots with whatever potting mix you chose and lay them on their sides at each end. Roots will easily grow into the medium in the pots but little if any soil will wash out.

If you would like to have an extra reserve of water in addition to what the pool at the bottom will hold, place a glass or plastic bottle with a narrow opening at the top upside down in the pool with the tops near the bottom. It will slowly release water just like the upside down bucket with a small hole in the lid did in the shallow pool garden.

You can now fill the eave trough with either a good planting medium (commercial potting mix, compost, etc) or use any of the materials discussed in the shallow bed garden section. I have often used wood chips for a lighter weight garden, though it needs to be watered more frequently because the chips themselves don't hold much water. Sometimes I use wood chips or Perlite in the bottom half to ensure more air deeper in the bed and potting mix in the top half. One advantage of an eave trough filled only with wood chips is that when the plants have drawn most of the water from the chips, the trough is surprisingly light in weight. You can see the result in the two photos of both me and my wife, Bonnie, easily carrying a 5-foot flower bed



A big advantage of having a few easily portable container gardens is that you can have some ornamentals “in reserve” to very quickly rejuvenate an area that is looking ragged, or to quickly create a new area that looks well-established. My in-laws were planning to visit from Michigan. I had just finished placing a bench overlooking our pond, but wanted to touch it off with a bed of impatiens. I easily relocated an eave trough of impatiens, filled in with mulch, and it looked fantastic, like it had been planted weeks before. See photo.



Bonnie and I had fun one evening when we were invited to a friend’s house for a New Year’s eve party. Knowing that we were gardeners, we were asked to bring a salad. We proudly walked in carrying the lettuce garden growing in an eave trough. We didn’t have a camera for that occasion, but you can see the garden being held by Kelly Sherman, ECHO’s PR director at the time in the photo below



You can easily make a wall of vegetables or flowers on any flat spot by just stacking cement blocks as can be seen in the photo. You will see it adjoining the wall of eave troughs, topped with two wading pool gardens growing vegetables and flowers. The table is constructed using only a shovel, a level and a hand saw. Using the level and shovel, make a base where the four columns will be supported.

Make four columns of cement blocks at the corners what will become a 4X8 foot table. Cut one 8-foot landscaping timber into two 4-foot pieces and locate them at the two ends. Next place enough 8-foot timbers on top of those 4-foot pieces to make a bed. You are done! No carpentry skills required and it is very sturdy.



The Yellow arrows point to the five troughs that make up this display

This technique is useful only for small plants, unless a trellis and very frequent watering are used. You can transplant or direct seed. For example, I have had good results growing leaf lettuce, onions, radishes and kohlrabi, as well as small annual flowers such as impatiens and begonias and smaller herbs. A long bed of garlic chives (also known as Chinese chives) can produce 12 months of the year for several years.

Here are specific instructions for one way I have made eave trough gardens. (Refer back to the discussion of shallow bed in shallow pool gardens.)

If you plan to start by planting seeds. After forming the water reservoir, “pool,” and placing the 4-inch pots at the end and 1/3 of the way from each end, fill the trough half way to the top with wood chips. Sprinkle two tablespoonfuls of 10/10/10 fertilizer with micronutrients and 1 tablespoon of dolomite across the chip bed and gently work them into the upper parts of the bed. Fill the eave trough to the top with compost or potting mix. To facilitate water being wicked up through the wood chips and keeping the top layer of compost/potting mix moist, create a few “columns” of potting mix tied in with mix on top. Add the same fertilizer and dolomite amounts unless you know that the potting mix already has good fertility. Now plant seeds as you would in any garden.

If you plan to transplant into the trough. After adding the wood chips and nutrients, place the rootball of the plant so that the top will be near the top of the trough. It is OK if the bottom will be below the high water mark. If the rootball is so small that it will not make contact with the pool of water, remove wood chips under it to below the high water mark and fill the bottom of the hole with your planting medium to help wick water up to the rest of the plant. As an example, I have found it works well to purchase five impatiens (an annual flower) that are available in 4-inch pots. I transplant one at each end, one in the middle between the two “monitoring wells” and the other two in the remaining space. In a few weeks it will be a solid row of color. (See Photo)

If I now make an “A-frame” that will hold five of these eave troughs I will have an amazing solid wall of color. If you would rather not go to the work of making an A-frame, you can make a “stair case” of steps using cement blocks for the same effect.

Chapter 4 Concluding Thoughts

Summary of Advantages and Special Applications of Above-Ground Gardens

During a visit to Santarem, a city about 500 miles from the mouth of the Amazon River in Brazil, I saw substantial areas near the Amazon River where most gardening is done in shallow beds on platforms. Local people have differing explanations for why this is done. I asked a few people why they went to the effort to construct platforms for their vegetables. In flood-prone locations the advantage is obvious, but platform gardens in the region are a primary gardening method even where it never floods. Some say that they plant gardens on platforms to avoid damage by small animals. In part the platform gardens have most likely become tradition and some gardeners may do it just because that is the way it is done. Wayne Smith wrote ECHO, "They make a 4-7 foot-long platform of sticks, an old canoe etc. They place a layer of dirt and ashes/cinders on top, and then grow mainly green onions." I have also heard that some farmers of Mayan descent in southern Mexico use the same technique.

Soils in some regions of the Amazon basin contain a lot of aluminum. When soils are highly acidic, as is the case in this location along the Amazon, the aluminum ion dissolves and is then toxic to many vegetables. The improved growing medium that is concentrated on the platforms may give much better results in such situations.

I have seen shallow bed gardens on platforms used in some countries to reduce the chance that chickens will destroy the young plants. It can be especially helpful to locate a seedbed on a platform for producing seedlings for transplanting into the garden. Development workers in Kiffa, Mauritania, near Rancho Ebenezer in Nicaragua and near Hinch, Haiti have found a lot of interest in adapting tire gardens for similar purposes, placing tires on structures made from poles.

They are ideal for making gardens for the handicapped. Most of the garden types we have discussed can be constructed on top of some sort of platform, making gardening available to people with physical handicaps that prevent them from working in the soil. If platforms are placed at the right height, people in wheelchairs can garden easily. The platforms can be constructed of inexpensive materials because the gardens weigh so little.

You can avoid soil diseases and pests. Root-knot nematodes are such a problem in Florida that some susceptible plants cannot be grown unless the soil is first sterilized. However, some fungi that live on decaying organic material kill nematodes. If we have enough organic matter in the soil we can sometimes get around the nematode problem. If we have 100% organic matter, as in some shallow bed and hybrid garden designs, or no soil, as in the wick and shallow-pool gardens, we have no root-knot nematodes.

After a few growing seasons, however, the decay process is essentially over. At this point the nematode-killing fungi may no longer be present and nematodes can again become a problem, unless the bed is renovated with fresh organic matter.

Examples of some plants that are highly susceptible to root knot nematodes include squashes, cucumbers, green beans, and peas. Some vegetables produce a useable harvest in spite of being heavily infected, as can be seen by looking at the roots. A scientist specializing in nematode problems told me that this means these vegetables are actually resistant, that is they were susceptible to being infected but were able to sufficiently overcome the damage that they could still produce a crop. Examples that come to mind include okra, tropical pumpkins, and winged beans. These plants may give a reasonable yield but may die prematurely and, when pulled from the ground, display roots heavily covered by the characteristic knots. Some vegetables in my experience seem to be relatively unaffected by root knot nematodes, though I cannot say that they cannot be harmed by them. These include corn, sorghum, onions, tomatoes (but only varieties developed to be nematode resistant), cabbage, kale, collard, garlic chives, and many herbs.

There may be other serious problems with the soil that lend themselves to aboveground gardening, even in rural areas. For example, the soil may be exceptionally acidic or alkaline, be too sandy or have too much heavy clay, or be filled with rocks. In some urban areas the ground may have high levels of heavy metals as a result of pollutants over the decades falling to the ground in rainfall or just settling out as the winds blew them over the garden.

You can garden near or in the shade of trees. Aboveground techniques can be used to make gardens on a sheet of plastic under trees. Any material that has no cracks or holes through which roots can grow can be used to make a bed that is unaffected by nearby tree roots. Benefits are that tree roots are not damaged by tillage; the plastic prevents them from interfering with the vegetables; and many plants benefit from light shade. Tire gardens are especially adaptable and can be placed anywhere that provides enough light, even directly on protruding tree roots or on a pile of rocks.

Limiting Factors in Above-Ground Gardening

It is not difficult to list possible problems with aboveground gardens.

- The poor may live in homes with rooftops that cannot even bear the weight of a person.
- Those (presumably more wealthy) with the most substantial rooftops may have the least incentive to garden on them.
- Fertilizers may not be available, especially fertilizers that contain micronutrients.
- People may not be prepared to give daily care to a garden.

- If you are working with a community group, it may be difficult to standardize on a particular formula (often made from recycled ingredients) that everyone can make and can expect similar results.
- Water may be scarce or have to be purchased. Compost is usually not available unless people make their own, and motivation to do this may be lacking.
- The potential gardener may have very little space in which to make compost.
- Urban gardening projects in general have a reputation of little payoff among many in the development community.

There are situations where any of these problems may be critical. However, the world is a very, very large place. If a certain technique is only suited to one percent of urban areas we are talking about millions of potential gardens. A creative mind and innovative and can-do attitude is helpful to see successful above-ground projects develop. An idea that, if successful, promises to make acres of prime, presently unused, arable “land” suddenly available for producing food and some income, is deserving of extra effort. We can begin with those thousands of situations where the above problems are not limiting, while we consider how to include more people in growing their own food.

Special Considerations

It is imperative that your first community project succeeds. Do not involve many people in aboveground gardening until you are sure you know what will work and have done it yourself for at least one season. The success of the first community project is more important than saving money on every possible ingredient. I think particularly of fertilizers. A common question is, “Why not use compost or manure ‘tea’ instead of fertilizer?” It is possible, but it is far from foolproof. (See previous discussion of this topic.) If a gardening system is based on manure as the primary fertilizer it is almost certain that some gardeners will fail not because the methods themselves have a problem but because of inadequate amounts of some or all of the essential nutrients in the compost or manure tea. It is quite possibly cheaper (and certainly less offensive to the neighborhood) to use fertilizer than to haul in manure from the countryside. But more importantly, if it fails you will probably not get a second chance with the people who tried your “far out” idea of above-ground gardening.

Consider the market before promising people that they can make money on their gardens. A Colombian organization developed a shallow bed/hydroponic system with many similarities to what we discuss in this chapter. The project used donated rubbish--rice bran from a mill and wooden crates from an automobile parts shop--and recycled polythene from commercial flower farms. In addition to what the 130 participating families used themselves, the cooperative sold over three tons of vegetables each month. A major supermarket chain bought produce from the community. Once a week produce was brought in, weighed, and paid for on the spot. From the sale of vegetables grown on the roof, the organization could pay the rent on their center. This enterprise was highly publicized

in news articles both in Colombia and elsewhere, and apparently was very successful for many years. ECHO was never able to make contact with the project directors. We heard that the project ended once the funding stopped, due to difficulty in obtaining the hydroponic nutrients. A person who visited the site told me that the murder of a key leader dealt a major blow to the project. While it was operating, a key ingredient was that when each garden was planted, the market for its produce was guaranteed. This no doubt took a lot of leadership to provide the quality control and regular supply required by a supermarket contract. But even lacking such leadership, the vegetables can still be grown and eaten at home or sold in the informal marketing system.



A St. Petersburg gardener grows in recycled peat bags.

Where Are These Above-Ground Methods Being Used Today?

ECHO and several people in our network have been involved in projects for a number of years. A small organization called “Haiti Gardens” has worked for years in and around Port-au-Prince.

ECHO and the Center for Citizen Initiatives in California sponsored demonstration rooftop gardens in St. Petersburg, Russia in the 1990s, in collaboration with Russian colleagues Sasha Gavrillov, Alla Sokol and others. The combination of a population that loves gardening, a shortage of food at the time, and an exceptionally high educational level made this seem like an ideal location. Nearly every citizen lives and works in buildings with huge flat rooftops made of cement and coated with tar of some sort. But on my last trip to Russia, around the year 2000, the vision appeared to have faltered.

The main problem is in getting official permission to use the roofs. I was told that people often now own the apartments in which they live and must collectively be responsible for the building. Individual gardeners-to-be have difficulty getting permission to use the rooftop. What if they damage the water repellent layer? Would-be gardeners are afraid that when the day inevitably comes when there is a leak, they will be held responsible (whether or not they caused the damage). Building residents and probably the building engineer are reluctant to let someone or a group garden on the roof because the building engineer or the residents as a whole gain nothing and do take on some risk.

Institutions can more easily establish rooftop gardens than can individuals because the director of the institution that decides to establish the garden also controls the roof. He or she is the one who must repair it should it be damaged by the garden or gardeners. There were a modest number of rooftop gardens in St. Petersburg when I was last there around 2002. One garden on an apartment building has become a mini-farm, producing onions, herbs, and growing some container berry plants for resale. In 1995 a large garden was planted on the roof of the main prison in St. Petersburg. (See photo below.) This was possible because the warden made the decision for whatever reasons he perceived would be beneficial.



You can see a few photos from othr locations below.



The Frontier Above Us: Haiti



Tire Gardens Are Also Used in Rural Areas



Does this vision excite you? I hope I have succeeded in imprinting in your mind a vision for what cities could become. I hope that, like me, you will no longer be able to drive through a city with flat roofs on homes or major buildings without thinking, “There could be a garden there...and there...and there! There could be acres/hectares of food-producing gardens in this city!” I hope you can see applications for struggling suburban and rural farm families. I hope you will pick a few techniques to try yourself on your property or balcony or in collaboration with a school or community garden.

This vision can happen and you can be part of it. The world needs “urban gardening champions” who will spread the vision, learn and adapt through experience, then build demonstration gardens and begin helping people see that they too can use the techniques as you have refined them for their situation.

I hope you will share your experiences with ECHO. Also, if you run into problems, drop me a line mprice@echonet.org. I or someone else at ECHO may have insights that can help you work around the problems as well as learn from you. When you have successes, tell us about them and maybe email some photos. We can rejoice with you and can encourage others by sharing your experience.

With your help we can see enormous amounts of food produced and improved incomes for many ordinary people as we help them develop this last agricultural frontier—the one above us.

ADDENDUM

The reader might also be interested in looking into some other examples for gardening on rooftops or above the ground.

Three gardening methods are getting a lot of attention in developing countries: “sack gardens”, “straw bale gardens” and “keyhole gardens”. These are not well suited for rooftop gardens. You can find many examples by searching on the internet.

Below are photos that did not fit into the book, but are interesting illustrations of many above-ground situations.



Vegetables growing on ECHO's simulated rooftop garden in a very shallow bed.



This eave trough garden contains some veggies ready to eat.



Several container gardens at our home.

The following is taken from Echo Development Notes #84, July 2004

One of the many gardens that resulted from a World Vision project by Stan & Beth Doerr. A fence and functioning tire gardens are also visible in the picture. Kiffa, Mauritania.

<https://www.echocommunity.org/en/resources/3a1cf7d9-f657-4058-9f9d-da667e85c511>



Tire Gardens from work of Mark Hare in Haiti.

Taken from ECHO Development Notes Issue #124

<https://www.echocommunity.org/en/resources/2f36d6e6-13a6-439f-89c5-169eb2255915>



Handicapped Garden at ECHO: Shallow
Bed on top of a platform

**Dr Job Ebenezer led a container garden project in outskirts of
Columbus, Ohio**



Vegetables growing on a Chicago rooftop, led by Dr. Job Ebenezer with the Lutheran Church



Water chestnuts growing on ECHO's simulated rooftop. They die back at ECHO around December, indicating that it is time to harvest. These are growing in a wading pool with no drainage and filled tight with pine needles. Fertilizer was added as needed. The edible “chestnuts” are all right on the bottom where they can be easily picked when the tops die back.



Keyhole and Sack Gardens

Finally, this book would be incomplete without mentioning “key hole” and “sack” gardens. Both techniques are well adapted to almost any setting where there is sunlight—except on rooftops, where their weight would in many cases be a problem. Both methods are inexpensive to build, can be built “in place” almost anywhere with minimal instruction, and can be quite productive.

I will not go into much detail because there are so many places on the internet where you can read (or watch a video) of first-hand accounts. It is interesting to see how different communities have adapted these techniques to their situation. You will find links to just a few examples at the end of this discussion.

The “sack” gardens (also called “bag” gardens) are easier and faster to construct than a keyhole garden. The sack might be a burlap or woven plastic bag that the family already has because the feed or vegetables or grain or coffee that they buy and sell in the market comes in such bags. In urban areas in western countries you can purchase new bags in feed or hardware stores.

Build the sack at the spot where you want to have the garden. It would be impractical to move it once it is constructed without dismantling and then rebuilding it in a new location. If there are aggressive tree roots nearby, place something like a thick plastic sheet as a barrier where you are going to place the sack.

Here are the basic steps to making the garden. If all materials are ready, it can be finished and planted in no more than an hour. Decide on a good planting medium that is available (garden soil, commercial soil mixes, compost, etc.). When finished the bag will be filled to the top. You can plant directly into the soil at the top but can also cut holes in the sides of the sack where seeds or seedlings can be inserted. It is always watered from the top as needed.

But how is that water to reach the roots of plants growing near the bottom? As the soil is gradually placed in the bag, have on hand some kind of cylinder that is open at both ends. Use your imagination. You might pick a plastic juice bottle cut to be roughly five inches in length. You might cut both ends out of a metal can that contained food bought in the grocery store. Or use a piece of plastic pipe at least four inches in diameter.

Add an inch or two of soil in the bottom of the bag, place the cylinder in the middle on top of the soil. Now fill inside the bag around the cylinder with soil. Have on hand already a quantity of gravel or small rocks. Fill the cylinder with gravel/rocks and then carefully move it up to the point that it is not quite out of the gravel. Now add more soil around the cylinder and continue this process until you are clear at the top of the bag. Now remove the cylinder. You have just created a column of gravel and rocks right down the center of the garden. When you water the garden, pour the water on the gravel so that it will slowly move down, watering the entire bag. Ideally the bag itself will continue to be useable for at least a year.

An ECHO employee who spent some time at ECHO's Regional Impact Center in Tanzania told me that one issue she saw there was that often one side of the sack gets much less sunlight. Consider planting something that will still thrive in lower sunlight on that side. Also give thought to how the angle of the sun will change throughout the day and with changing seasons.

Some of the sack gardens being demonstrated on YouTube drive three stakes into the ground very close to the bag. That may be to prevent animals or children from accidentally knocking the garden over.

I do have one reservation. I've looked at many sack gardens on the web, but many just show how it is made. Only a few show the end product. That end product often seems disappointing to me. Without knowing the gardening skills of the owner, I don't know if there is an inherent problem with the bag system, or the soil is not fertile, or if the gardener just needs more practice.

I asked ECHO staff member Stacy Swartz, who spent several months at ECHO's Tanzanian office, about this. "I have seen some AMAZING sack gardens in TZ. I think it largely depends on watering because the sacks dry out quickly if they aren't maintained well. And really only half of them do well (usually because the other side shades it out or it's next to a building). This photo is an example. The top half does better than the bottom which is why we often planted weedier greens (like vegetable amaranth and edible nightshade) in the bottom half and the higher value leafy greens in the top half of the sack.

Alyssa Barrett (ECHO staff) added this. "I had that problem with my sack gardens here in FL. I would plant hardier plants in the bottom (katuk, chaya, moringa), leafy greens in the center and higher levels, and herbs or strawberries on the very top of the sack. I think another very important aspect to help with watering is the center piece. The material needs be porous enough to let water through, but also sturdy enough to not break down so quickly that it blocks the water flow.



Photos of Sack Gardens in Tanzania by Stacy Swartz, ECHO



“Keyhole” gardens are basically round gardens built up to 2-3 feet high, with a walkable pathway to a “hole” at the center that makes it resemble a key. Usually there is a wall of some sort around the outside, perhaps made of rocks or bamboo or wood stakes.

The garden might be as much as 10 feet in diameter. Vegetables in such a large circular garden would not be accessible to harvest nearer the center—without the “keyhole” pathway. Vegetables are harvested from the outside around the perimeter but also along the keyhole pathway and from the very center where the pathway stops. So if the reach of my arm is 2 ½ feet I can harvest that distance all around the exterior, and another 2 ½ feet from inside the keyhole. That adds up to 10 feet. distance all around the exterior, and another 2 ½ feet from inside the keyhole. That adds up to 10 feet.

Sometimes the center of the keyhole is used to place weeds and other organic residues to add fertility to the garden. The keyhole garden can continue to produce as long as the fertility is adequate and the walls do not rot away





Illustrations on the web showing construction of sack gardens:

A large number of photos from various sources show a variety of sack gardens. Here are three to get you started.

https://www.google.com/search?q=sack+gardening+in+uganda&rlz=1C1JZAP_enUS781US781&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjgq24kP_cAhVxplkKHYdyCSwQsAR6BAgFEAE&biw=1600&bih=801

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TuEGptDzMaA> Young girls in Africa made this one. Note the use of what looks to be something like a 3-pound coffee can with the top and bottom cut out.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NNgYyVlcOCc>

“Let me conclude with a bit of container garden humor. I found this photo on Facebook, but without the photographer’s name or comments. (If you are the photographer and happen to read this, please email me or contact ECHO!)”



