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Salad Tables March 2018

The trend of growing your own food has caught on like wildfire. Whether gardeners are doing the traditional in-ground garden or growing a few herbs and tomatoes in containers on their decks, there are more people growing edible gardens than ever before. For those of us who live in areas with poor, rocky soils the use of raised beds has made the job a lot easier. Raised beds come in all sizes and shapes and are made in many different ways. A new trend that is beginning to catch on in the south is salad tables.

The concept for the salad table, an elevated shallow raised bed garden started in the mid 2000's in Maryland. Jon Traunfeld, extension horticulture specialist for the University of Maryland came up with the idea after seeing something similar at an organic farm. He developed plans to build one and took the show on the road, speaking at gardening events all over Maryland, and then branching out to regional and national MG events. The concept caught on and other Master Gardener groups adopted it. Mississippi Master Gardeners embraced the idea and have been busy building various forms of the salad garden now for several years. Lonoke County, Arkansas Master Gardeners heard about it and traveled to Mississippi to get the information on how to build them, and now the concept is growing in Arkansas.

The original salad table is basically a 3-inch-deep, 11-square-foot planting box on legs. It has a hardware-cloth bottom, lined with window screening, so that water can drain but soil mix stays put. The table can be lifted by two people; better yet, if you put casters on the legs it can be rolled. In Maryland, they put the casters on two legs and then lifted and moved the garden as needed.

In the south, we may need a bit more depth if the salad garden is going to be functional during the summer. Gardens can be 4 inches or 6 inches in depth, but the same basic concept is in place. The traditional salad garden is waist high so you can stand and garden. For those in need of wheelchair height or a child's height, the plans can be adapted.

Salad tables can be used out in the yard or on a deck or patio--wherever there is enough light to garden. If you are growing salad greens or kale, Swiss chard or bok choy, you can actually move the garden into a bit of shade as the heat of summer progresses. With it being raised, you usually don't have any trouble with rabbits, armadillos or groundhogs. Squirrels can gain access and hungry deer might venture near.

The plans to build these gardens is online at both the Maryland Extension site
<https://extension.umd.edu/hgic/learn/salad-tables%E2%84%A2>
and Mississippi State

<https://extension.msstate.edu/sites/default/files/publications/miscellaneous/m2064.pdf>

Each one is a little bit different. Maryland uses untreated lumber while Mississippi State (and Lonoke MG's) uses only cypress. The traditional salad table is 36 inches long by 30 inches wide with 32 inches of ground clearance but they can be built to fit your space or needs.

Because of the size, soil from the garden should not be used. It would be too heavy plus it would contain weed seeds and possible diseases. Instead use a combination of lightweight potting soil and compost.

Here are the directions from the Pine Belt Master Gardeners in Mississippi who trained our Lonoke county Master Gardeners:

1. Create the frame of the salad table top using the pieces of 6-by1-inch wood. Screw two of the three shorter pieces to the two longer pieces to create a rectangle. Use 1 5/8 inch or larger coated exterior wood screws. Be sure the corners are square.
2. Slide the other shorter piece of wood into the rectangle. For this table, you'll need only one crosspiece. If you make a longer table, be sure to place crosspieces about every 18 inches. Use wood screws to attach the crosspiece to the frame.
3. Turn the frame so that the side you want to become the bottom is facing up. Staple the fiberglass screen to the box with 5/8-inch staples.
4. Nail the hardware cloth over the fiberglass screen using galvanized roofing nails.
5. Now add the legs. Each leg is formed by two pieces of 38-inch long 4x1. The legs meet at right angles on the outside edge of each corner. Screw the legs to the table top using 1 5/8" coated exterior wood screws.
6. Use a lightweight potting soil mix to plant your table. You can use transplants or seeds to fill your table with shallow-rooted plants. You may need to water more frequently in hot, dry weather.

The Lonoke County Master Gardeners will actually build a salad table for you, but at the recent Arkansas Flower & Garden Show where they had a demonstration table, they were inundated with orders and they have a small group of volunteers who are building them, so it may not be a quick turn-around. Call the Lonoke County office for more information at 501-76-3124.

Once you have a salad table, the sky is the limit on what you can grow. Tall and deep rooted vegetables will be more of a challenge, but when growing any flowers, vegetables and herbs, remember to fertilize regularly and water as needed. Drip irrigation systems could also be an easy irrigation method to install to keep up with the watering needs and keep the foliage dry.



