

Huglekultur: Raised Bed Gardening Without Digging or Irrigation

by Barb Howe



a massive 30'-foot long horizontal tree trunk? You could pay thousands of dollars to have a tree company haul it away or you could do *huglekultur*.

Huglekultur is an old German farming technique involving

layers of logs, limbs, and branches topped with top soil. You can dig a hole and pile the logs inside or you can just lay the logs on the ground and build the pile up to form a mound. Either way, the idea is to put the largest logs on bottom and progressively smaller ones on top until you finish with just a foot or two of dirt on the top. The two main benefits are 1) as the logs and limbs decompose they

release nitrogen (and heat) into the soil just like a compost pile, and 2) the wood acts as a sponge when it rains, making irrigation largely unnecessary.

I decided to turn my fallen tree trunk into a giant huglekultur garden. I hired a friend with a chainsaw to cut the limbs up into two to three-foot logs. Then we used a handcart to stand them on end around the base of the tree, forming a little wall. Because of the shape of the trunk, I ended up with three "raised" garden beds around the base of the trunk.

After we got the walls in place, we started piling logs and branches inside. Because store-bought dirt is so expensive, I decided to add a layer of free mulch from the city (thanks GRU!) to fill in some of the volume. It still took several bags of dirt per bed. An alternative could have been to dig dirt from elsewhere in the yard and make a pond, but I was not that ambitious.

Finally, after weeks of work, I was ready to plant.

Some things did well, like herbs and beans, but other things faltered. After consulting with various gardening experts, I learned that while the decomposing tree will eventually give off nitrogen, for the first couple of years it was going to do the opposite, sucking up all the nitrogen out of my expensive store-bought soil and stealing it from my plants. Beans are nitrogen "fixers," meaning they put nitrogen back into the soil, so I planted more of them.

For other things I just had to supplement for the loss of nitrogen

with extra fertilizer.

Another appealing aspect was that, as laurel oaks are known to do, this tree had rotted from the inside out even before it fell, so once it was horizontal there was a nice little hollow "trough" on top. I hauled buckets of dirt up there and filled in the trough and planted violets and strawberries. I had the most success, though, with cherry tomatoes. Being a vine, they draped themselves over the side of the trunk and formed a curtain of green. No staking needed.

I won't deny that this was an incredible amount of hard labor, but I saved a lot on not needing a gym membership during those months. And moreover, I have an interesting, unique piece of yard art that will last for twenty years at least! People often stop to admire it, and everyone in the neighborhood knows I live in the house with the fallen tree garden.

Being a fan of Japanese filmmaker Hayao Miyazaki, I named my giant tree garden "Totoro" after the forest spirit who napped on his back in the woods in the 1988 film. Going into my second year, Totoro is filled with calendula, cilantro, and snapdragons. And yes, still more beans. When the weather warms, I'll plant cherry tomatoes in the trough again.

If you'd like to learn more about huglekultur just google it and you will find all the same articles that taught me how to do it. So next time a storm knocks one of your trees down, consider saving some money and turning it into a beautiful, unique addition to your garden that will reward you with healthy plants for years to come.

Barb Howe is a local writer and artist who splits her time between DC and her home state of Florida. She has an undergraduate degree in literature from the University of South Florida and a graduate degree in political science from the University of Florida.



A few months after I bought my little house in Gainesville, Hurricane Irma came through and toppled a huge, mostly-dead laurel oak I had been saving up to have taken out. (Note to new homeowners: tree work is expensive!) The tree fell in a perfect north-south line, smashed the fence, and took out a utility pole, but luckily hit no one's house or car. What do you do with



Photographs Courtesy of Barb Howe



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Let us a little permit Nature to take her own way; she better understands her own affairs than we.

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