

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

# Keyhole gardening

BY SIOUX ROGERS



Sioux Rogers

This article is dedicated to Scott Owbridge, a wonderful new friend and garden helper. He amazingly and impressively helps me in my garden despite his physical challenges. Scott is interested in keyhole gardens because he says he will most likely be in a wheelchair sometime in the future. Keyhole gardening will be his “ticket” to continue pursuing his passion for gardening. In fact, Scott and I are building a “practice” keyhole garden now.

All of us are challenged at times in our everyday existence, but that is all it is, a challenge. Survivors figure out how to overcome a challenge with a positive outcome. I, at barely five feet tall, am vertically challenged. I overcame this inconvenience by having numerous step stools everywhere and marrying a guy who is 6’ 4” tall.

Keyhole gardening was actually developed in southern Africa to address the challenge of sparse resources and unforgiving heat. When a keyhole garden is built to the height of three feet or a little taller and three feet across, it will accommodate a wheelchair or an aching back. The three-foot reach is very easy from inside the notch or from around the outside. Three keyhole gardens are “more than enough to supply” a family of ten “with all the vegetables they need,” reported BBC ([news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7432972.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7432972.stm)).

A demonstration of a keyhole garden in the US was built at, of all places, a hardware store in Texas. The wall structure for the planter was built with native Texas rock and clay. The “soil” was started using 129 shredded phone books, a large load of cardboard from the store’s dumpster, and some manure. Can you believe that in four weeks they had good useable soil?

To visualize keyhole gardening, picture a donut. Okay, a really *big* donut. Now take a big bite out of that donut, but not all the way to the center hole. The “donut bite” is the keyhole.

After looking at many pictures of keyhole gardens, I realized that not all of them are in the shape of a partially eaten donut. Some are actually square or another shape, but whatever the shape, the principle is the same: a notch in the middle of the structure provides easy access. And get this: in the middle is a vertical compost tower. This compost tower is so clever and saves an extraordinary amount of time by not having to be turned and tossed, as required by a traditional compost bin.

The compost basket in the center of the keyhole notch functions best, it seems, when it is wire. This is the clever part: Everything you use for composting goes in the long wire basket. Layer it just as you would your regular compost pile. Compostable material, including grey water, is added to the tower throughout

the growing season. When the bed gets watered, the compost tower will also get watered. Remember, compost needs water to break down to the prized organic matter that gardeners sometimes refer to as “black gold,” which makes plants so very happy. In a matter of weeks, the compost will start to break down and leak out the wire frame, gently infusing lovely liquid composted fertilizer. Sounds interesting, right?

The keyhole garden actually uses some of the principles of biodynamic gardening: don’t step on the soil so as not to compact it, plant close together, and never rototill. Eventually the closely spaced plants will form a canopy over the bed, thus reducing water evaporation.

Traditionally keyhole gardens are constructed with stone. The stone wall not only gives the garden its form, but helps trap moisture within the bed. But

keyhole gardens can be made from other materials too. (Google “keyhole gardening,” click on “Images,” and activate your creative brain.)

Keyhole gardening is *not* just for us country folks. City slickers can benefit as much or more due to frequent lack of garden space in urban areas. The structure can be placed anywhere: the rooftop, the driveway, or in the middle of the sidewalk. Just kidding, but you get the idea.

Dirty fingernails and all,  
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Keyhole gardens in various stages of completion. (Right photo: [irenegrimes.files.wordpress.com](http://irenegrimes.files.wordpress.com). Bottom right photo: [ihptz.org/?q=gallery&page=1](http://ihptz.org/?q=gallery&page=1). Bottom left photo: [txmg.org/williamson/2015/06/15/week-ending-6142015/](http://txmg.org/williamson/2015/06/15/week-ending-6142015/).)



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