

Hügelkultur Comes to Calvin

by Londa Jacques, *Diggin' Shoreline* (published by *Shoreline Area News*)

A *hügel-what-er* you may be asking? Hügelkultur is a German word, meaning “hill culture”, and one of the latest trends in sustainable farming and gardening sweeping the United States.

Jarret Griesemer, Project Coordinator from King Conservation District’s Urban Agriculture program approached Becki Koukal-liebe of Diggin’ Shoreline seeking a space in town to do a Hügelkultur installation. An ideal site for the installation was found at Calvin Presbyterian Community Garden. Becki and Jarret explained the project to Dan Coppin and the church properties committee, who gave it their blessing. With the church on board, KCD put the word out for volunteers, and so did Diggin’.


On Nov 12, despite the wet and windy weather, 19 volunteers from as far away as Redmond and Renton, Diggin’ followers and folks from Hillwood neighborhood participated. Some were experienced hügel installers, while others came to work and learn. At 9:30 AM ceremonial groundbreaking pics were snapped, and by 12:30 PM the project was done and tools put away! We accomplished in less than 3 hours, what was expected to take 6—the completion of a 5-foot wide by 18-foot long by more than 3-foot tall planting hill.

Actually, the practice of Hügelkultur has been around for several hundred years. This method involves digging and removing the top one-foot of soil and sod, and layering of organic materials—rotting wood, branches, twigs, straw, compost, green manure, removed soil/sod, compost, and topsoil. Most of the ingredients needed to build such a bed are things that gardeners prune, chop, rake or toss in compost piles and yard waste bins on a regular basis.

Hügelkultur has several amazing advantages over traditional raised bed gardening. Think of it as a time-lapse version of the hundreds-year-old soil creation process that takes place on the forest floor. With decomposition accelerated, nutrients are released more quickly, and moisture is retained. The practice is ideal for restoring contaminated, depleted, and compacted urban soils.

If you stop by the Calvin garden (corner of N 185th & Richmond Beach Road) now, you’ll simply see a high mound covered by burlap bags. In a few weeks, the hill will lose one-third of its height, the bags will be gone and planting will begin—perennials on top, annuals at the base. The bed will be used to raise food bank crops, and many more plants can be grown on the mound’s surface than on its flat footprint.

But underneath is where the real magic is happening. The interwoven logs and branches are already retaining water (so much so that after a year very little, if any, water will be needed to maintain the bed), and the pile is heating up with the composting taking place. Soon there will be rapid growth of mycorrhizae and release of micronutrients. Plantings above will be fed as their roots reach deep into the loose, dark, crumbly soil that was once root-stunting, compacted clay.

Roots grew deeper in our community, too. Many thanks to the volunteers from KCD, Diggin’, Calvin, and Hillwood neighborhood who planned and approved the garden, hauled materials, performed the labor, fed the volunteers and cheered them on. Together we proved, once again, that many hands DO make light work! 



Becki Koukal-liebe (foreground) shovels native clay soil onto organic materials as Jarret Griesemer (background) adds water to start decomposition process