



EDDIE DEJONG

# The key to green

Keyhole gardening can overcome a variety of growing challenges

by ANNIE MAKOFF

**G**ood soil, sunlight and plenty of rain are the vital ingredients of growing a successful garden. But what if your soil is too chalky, your garden suffers from bad drainage or the area where you live has low rainfall? Keyhole gardening may be the answer.

Developed in the landlocked country of Lesotho in sub-Saharan Africa, a region known for its regular droughts, poor soil conditions and high altitudes—not to mention hot climate—keyhole gardening has revolutionized food farming in the area, and its popularity is growing across the globe.

“Keyhole gardens harness the power of Mother Nature by using natural, scientific chemical processes to develop heat and create nutrient-rich soil,” says Eddie Dejong, design team leader at Vita Gardens, a Canada-based portable gardening brand and Costco supplier. “It can extend the growing season by up to one month, and it produces four to five times more food in the same area than in a ground-dug garden.”

The keyhole garden concept is truly remarkable, not least because it ticks all the boxes of an eco-friendly, sustainable methodology, essential

Left: Alyssa Fisher at the Vita Gardens office garden in Sarnia, Ontario. Below, Eddie Dejong (left) and EJ Patterson in Rwanda.

in a world damaged by climate change and unsustainable development. So how exactly does it work?

### Raised for success

According to Dejong, keyhole gardens are raised circular beds, usually made from native materials like rocks and sticks, with keyhole-shaped access to the center, where there is a basket or tower filled with kitchen scraps for compost.

The raised beds are made up of densely packed layers of grass clippings and cardboard, all designed to create the most fertile, nutrient-rich soil after just three months. Less water is needed with this type of design, and the raised beds discourage evaporation and water loss through the ground. As Dejong explains, the open-bottom design encourages worms—the “rock stars” of the garden—to come up from the ground, turning food scraps into compost.

“It’s such a simple concept, but it works so well,” says Dejong. “Nothing is wasted. Every drop of water goes directly to the roots, which surround the food scrap basket. And the nutrients from the compost mean the plants are literally soaking in nutrients.”

It’s no surprise that keyhole gardening has really taken off globally: Water conservation and poor native soil are common challenges all over the world, notes Dejong, who adds, “At the same time, everybody wants to find easier ways to garden. There’s a generation coming up who understands the value and the need to grow their own food with minimal time.”

### Eco-friendly, sustainable, versatile

The raised beds mean that keyhole gardens are ideal for home gardeners with back problems. And using kitchen scraps and cardboard for compost, instead of disposing of them with

regular household waste, goes a long way toward a sustainable lifestyle.

Keyhole gardens can be stand-alone gardens or can be incorporated into existing gardens, and they work just as well on concreted areas as they do on grass.

Choose whether to fill the garden the traditional way as is done in Africa, using layers of cardboard, grass clippings and soil, or fill it entirely with soil. Just remember to wait until after the colder months before you start planting.

“Start collecting garden refuse months prior to assembling your keyhole garden,” Dejong advises. “Collect leaves and grass clippings during the autumn and save them until spring. After the entire planting and harvesting season is done, the entire vessel, with its very rich garden soil, can be dismantled and moved to other places in the garden to really make the most out of the soil-making process. Keyhole gardening really is a great addition to any outdoors area. It’s easy to use, productive and it looks great, too.” ■

Annie Makoff is a writer based in England.

### COSTCO CONNECTION

The keyhole garden kits supplied by Vita Gardens and available at Costco and Costco.com are all flat-packed and easy to assemble. Search “keyhole” at Costco.com.



ESTHER HAVENS PHOTOGRAPHY

## Rwanda roots

Eddie Dejong, design team leader at Costco supplier Vita Gardens, says the keyhole garden kits produced by his company have become almost an overnight success.

But Vita Gardens hasn’t

forgotten its roots.

“It felt right to give back to the continent we got the idea from,” he says. Vita Gardens helps communities in Rwanda build their own keyhole gardens by hiring local people and using local materials.

“The keyhole garden concept in Rwanda is almost a garden enigma—much more food production is harvested compared to a regular in-ground garden,” says Dejong.

“Our goal was to have

500 gardens, but the project took off so fast that we’ve now built over 700 gardens in two Rwandan villages.”

Dejong says that, through education and training, skills will be passed from this generation forward.—AM