



Hügelkultur Guide

HEALTHY SOIL
HIGHER GROUND
BRIGHTER
TOMORROWS

A science-based THAG fact sheet for high-altitude, semi-arid gardeners

What is Hügelkultur?

Hügelkultur is a raised garden mound built from woody materials, organic matter, compost, and soil. As the buried materials break down over time, they help store moisture, build soil, and create a productive planting zone. It's a simple, time-tested approach that turns natural materials into a long-term resource for a healthier, more resilient garden.



*Thriving gardens
in higher places!*

A hügelkultur mound filled with life — vegetables, flowers, and a healthier tomorrow.



Why gardeners use it

- ✓ Stores moisture better than flat, dry soil.
- ✓ Turns yard and garden materials into growing space.
- ✓ Builds soil over time.
- ✓ Creates room for vegetables, herbs, flowers, and pollinator plants.



Best for

- ✓ Gardeners with branches, leaves, straw, and space.
- ✓ Sunny sites with access to water.
- ✓ Mixed plantings including squash, pumpkins, herbs, and flowers.
- ✓ Gardeners willing to mulch and water well in the first year.

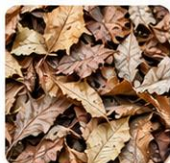


Avoid using

- ✗ Treated or painted wood.
- ✗ Diseased plant material.
- ✗ Trash or plastic.
- ✗ Aggressive weeds with seeds or roots.
- ✗ Wood chips inside the mound (best used on paths instead).

Common Materials

Use a mix of what you have on hand:



Leaves



Straw



Branches

Inside this guide

- 2 Benefits and limits of hügelkultur
- 3 Materials and site planning
- 4 6-step overview
- 5 Detailed build steps
- 6 Planting and first-year care
- 7 Troubleshooting and long-term care
- 8 THAG resources



*Better Soil
Brighter
Futures*



Benefits and limits of Hügelskultur

Healthy Soil
Higher Ground
Brighter
Tomorrows

Realistic expectations for healthier, more resilient gardens



Benefits

- ✓ Stores moisture better than flat, dry soil.
- ✓ Turns yard and garden debris into growing space.
- ✓ Builds soil life and organic matter over time.
- ✓ Releases nutrients gradually.
- ✓ Supports vegetables, herbs, flowers, and pollinator plants.



More than a garden —
a healthier tomorrow!

Hügelskultur turns natural materials into productive, resilient garden beds.

Same mound, over time



Mounds settle as materials break down — that's part of the process!



Limits to understand

- ✗ Requires labor and materials up front.
- ✗ Mounds settle over time.
- ✗ First-year irrigation is still important.
- ✗ Exposed windy sites can dry quickly without mulch.
- ✗ Not ideal if you have no access to water.
- ✗ Avoid adding food waste that attracts pests unless it is fully buried.



Best uses in high-altitude, semi-arid gardens

- ✓ Where branches and leaves are plentiful.
- ✓ Sunny sites with a nearby hose or drip line.
- ✓ Mixed plantings of squash, pumpkins, herbs, and flowers.
- ✓ Gardeners wanting to recycle fall cleanup materials.
- ✓ Gardeners building long-term soil.



Choose a simpler raised bed instead if...

- ✓ You have very little space.
- ✓ You need a neat, shallow bed right away.
- ✓ You do not have enough woody material.
- ✓ The site is so dry and windy that regular watering is unrealistic.





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Materials and site planning

Choose the right materials and location for a thriving hügelkultur garden.

Good materials

Use a mix of natural, untreated materials.

Woody core	Organic layer	Planting layer	Mulch
 ✓ Logs ✓ Thick branches ✓ Sticks ✓ Prunings Use a variety of sizes from small sticks to larger logs.	 ✓ Leaves ✓ Grass clippings ✓ Plant trimmings ✓ Spent crops ✓ Straw ✓ Fully buried kitchen scraps (if desired) Mix green and brown materials for balance.	 ✓ Compost ✓ Topsoil ✓ Aged manure (if appropriate) A nutrient-rich layer for healthy plant growth.	 ✓ Clean straw ✓ Other weed-free mulch (such as shredded leaves) Conserves moisture, keeps roots cool, and reduces weeds.

Avoid

Keep it natural and clean!

- ✗ Treated or painted wood.
- ✗ Diseased plants.
- ✗ Aggressive weeds with seeds or roots.
- ✗ Trash, plastic, or synthetic fabric.
- ✗ Wood chips inside the mound (best used on paths instead).
- ✗ Herbicide-contaminated materials.

Site checklist

A good location sets you up for success!

- ✓ Full sun or mostly sun (6+ hours daily).
- ✓ Access to water.
- ✓ Room for a path around the mound.
- ✓ Some wind protection if possible.
- ✓ Stable placement on the site.
- ✓ Allow the mound to settle (it will compress over time).

Common materials close-up

 Leaves Great carbon source. Use autumn leaves, plant clean-up debris, and leaf mold.	 Straw Conserves moisture, keeps soil cool, and reduces weeds.	 Branches Builds the long-lasting woody core. Use a mix of sizes.
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THAG Tip

Wood chips are best used on paths, not inside the mound.



Simple site plan

Give your mound room to grow!



Sun path (east to west)

Hügelkultur mound

Path around mound

Water access

Great gardens start with a great location!



6-step overview

From woody debris to a thriving garden

A science-based guide
for high-altitude,
semi-arid gardeners

1 Choose the site

Pick a sunny spot and allow room for a mound and path.



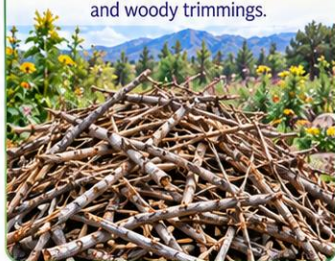
2 Lay the woody core

Start with logs and thick branches in contact with the soil.



3 Add smaller branches

Fill gaps with thinner sticks and woody trimmings.



4 Add organic materials

Layer leaves, plant trimmings, grass clippings, and other compostable matter.



5 Add compost + topsoil

Cover the mound with a generous planting layer.



6 Mulch, water, and plant

Top with straw, water deeply, and plant vegetables, herbs, or flowers.



THAG quick tips

- ✓ Build in fall or spring when temperatures are moderate.
- ✓ Use untreated, natural materials (no diseased plants, trash, or treated wood).
- ✓ Soak very dry layers to help them settle and start decomposing.
- ✓ Mulch deeply to conserve moisture and reduce weeds.
- ✓ Top-dress with compost as the mound settles over time.



Thriving gardens
in higher places!



Use wood chips on paths, not in the mound.



Detailed build steps: 1-3

Turn natural materials into a thriving garden, step by step

1 Choose the site

- ✓ Full sun is best (at least 6 hours of sunlight).
- ✓ Leave room for paths and harvesting.
- ✓ Choose a place you can water.
- ✓ Mark the footprint before you begin.



A sunny spot for a brighter tomorrow!

Mark your mound where it gets plenty of sun and fits your garden.

2 Lay the woody core

- ✓ Place big logs and thick branches on the soil.
- ✓ Mix sizes for stability (larger pieces on bottom).
- ✓ Use untreated, natural wood.
- ✓ Keep the mound shape broad rather than narrow and tippy.



Build a strong foundation with nature's wood!

Large logs and branches form the core of your hügelkultur mound.

3 Add smaller branches

- ✓ Fill spaces with thinner sticks and prunings.
- ✓ Tuck material in firmly to reduce air gaps.
- ✓ Mix in some leaves between layers.
- ✓ Water if materials are bone dry.



Smaller pieces fill the gaps!

Add smaller branches and prunings, tucking them in firmly.



Pro tips

- ✓ **Bigger wood on the bottom** – Use the largest logs and thickest branches at the base.
- ✓ **Thinner woody material above** – Add smaller branches, twigs, and prunings on top.
- ✓ **Do not bury trash or plastic** – Use only natural, untreated materials.
- ✓ **Expect the mound to settle** – It will compact over time. You can always add more material later.

Build today for a healthier tomorrow!



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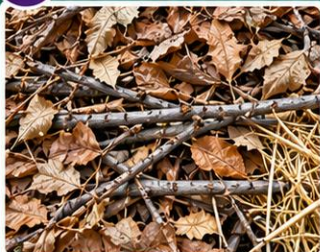
Natural materials.
Healthier gardens.
Happier days.



Detailed build steps: 4-6

From organic materials to a planted, thriving mound

4 Add organic materials



- ✓ Layer leaves, plant trimmings, grass clippings, and other compostable materials.
- ✓ Mix greens and browns when possible.
- ✓ Keep diseased plants out of the mound.
- ✓ Water very dry layers to speed decomposition.



A mix of materials creates balanced, long-lasting soil.

5 Add compost + topsoil



- ✓ Cover the mound with compost and soil.
- ✓ Create enough depth for roots (several inches).
- ✓ Smooth the planting surface so it's even and ready for planting.
- ✓ Top up with more compost and soil later as the mound naturally settles.



A rich top layer gives plants a strong start.

6 Mulch, water, and plant



- ✓ Add a deep straw mulch to conserve moisture and reduce weeds.
- ✓ Water deeply after planting.
- ✓ Use transplants if direct-seeded crops struggle in your climate.
- ✓ Plant vegetables, herbs, and flowers.



Mulch and water well for healthy, vigorous growth.



Great first-year choices

- ✓ **Squash and pumpkins** – vigorous and mound-friendly.
- ✓ **Cucumbers and beans** – great for warm, sunny sites.
- ✓ **Herbs** – basil, cilantro, chives, oregano, thyme, and more.
- ✓ **Pollinator flowers** – zinnias, calendula, cosmos, marigolds.
- ✓ **Tomatoes and peppers** – plant in generous soil pockets with steady water.



Abundant gardens in higher places!



The High Altitude Gardener | Hügelkultur Guide

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HIGHER GROUND
BRIGHTER
TOMORROWS

Planting, first-year care, and troubleshooting

Grow more
in higher places!

Healthy plants.
Resilient gardens.
Brighter tomorrows.



A thriving hügelkultur garden
in its first growing season.



Where to plant



First-year care

- ✓ Water deeply and consistently.
- ✓ Keep mulch in place.
- ✓ Top-dress with compost if low spots appear.
- ✓ Pull weeds before they seed.
- ✓ Watch for drying in wind and heat.



Good crops for year one



- ✓ Squash, pumpkins, cucumbers, beans, herbs, and flowers.
- ✓ Tomatoes and peppers if watered well.



Common problems and easy fixes

Problem

Easy fix

Mound sinks

Add compost, soil, and mulch.

Soil dries too fast

Water longer and mulch deeper.

Seeds struggle

Use transplants or extra soil pockets.

Woody pieces show

Cover with compost, leaves, and straw.

Critters dig

Keep food waste buried and harvest promptly.



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Futures

"A little care
goes a long way
in year one."



Long-term care and THAG resources

Keep your hügelkultur garden productive for years to come

HEALTHY SOIL
HIGHER GROUND
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Gardens grow
people too!



Yearly maintenance

- ✓ **Top-dress with compost**
Add a layer of finished compost every year (1–2 inches).
- ✓ **Renew mulch**
Keep a 2–4 inch layer of straw, leaves, or wood chips.
- ✓ **Tuck in plant matter**
Add fallen leaves and garden trimmings to the surface.
- ✓ **Reshape edges if needed**
Top up settled areas and keep a gentle mound shape.
- ✓ **Refresh plantings**
As the mound changes over time, add new plants and try different varieties.



Seasonal tips

- 🍁 **Fall**
Fallen leaves, plant trimmings, and spent plants can feed the next mound.
- ❄️ **Winter**
Protect bare soil with mulch to reduce erosion and keep moisture in the mound.
- 🐝 **Year-round**
Leave some stems and leaf litter nearby for native bees and beneficial insects if you are not rebuilding the mound.
- 💧 **Before hard freezes**
If soil is very dry, water deeply before winter to help the mound retain moisture.



Quick check before you build

- ✓ **Sunny spot**
At least 6 hours of direct sun (south-facing is ideal).
- ✓ **Access to water**
A nearby water source for initial building and first-year care.
- ✓ **Enough branches and leaves**
A good supply of woody material and leafy matter.
- ✓ **Clean, untreated materials**
Use natural materials (no pressure-treated wood, paint, or chemicals).
- ✓ **A plan for mulch and soil**
Have a source of mulch (straw, leaves, or wood chips) and topsoil or compost.



THAG resources



Website:
highaltitudegardener.com



YouTube:
[@TheHighAltitudeGardener](https://www.youtube.com/@TheHighAltitudeGardener)



Free science-based resources for mountain and semi-arid gardeners.



Original THAG fact sheets, videos, and bilingual gardening support.



*Knowledge
Plants Stronger
Communities*



Grow Food. Share Resources. Build Community.