

Speaker 1: [00:00](#) Welcome to the old fashioned on purpose podcast. Today's episode is going to dive deep into this story of why we decided to build a pretty extensive raised bed garden for our homestead. And it also involves the sad and scandalous tale of how I actually poisoned my first garden. If you have ever been curious about using raised beds or wondered if they're right for you, well this is an episode you won't want to miss. I'm your host Jill Winger and for the last 10 years I've been helping people who feel a little uninspired by modern life, learn how to leave the rat race and create the life they really want by learning how to grow their own food and master old fashioned skills. So some of you, if you follow me on my blog or on social media, you might know some of this story or you might've seen pictures of our raised bed garden, which is pretty unique and maybe you had some questions about it.

Speaker 1: [01:11](#) Actually I get frequent emails and messages from folks wanting to know how we built our garden or why we went with raised beds. And I know a lot of you are contemplating this. So I wanted to give you some backstory about why we ultimately went with this option. Now hopefully you won't have the same reasoning to start raised beds as we did because we had kind of a major, whoops, that was the catalyst for this decision. But regardless, raised beds can be a really great fit for some homesteads and some climate. I'm going to walk you through the thought process that we went through so you can apply it to your own situation. We didn't start off with raised beds when we bought our homestead, we went with your traditional in ground garden. We selected a plot near the edge of the yard, our homes that actually didn't have an existing garden and maybe if you know, it's a hundred years old, which kind of surprised me that there wasn't a garden plot, but it's likely that maybe there was one back in the day and it, you know, was since grown over or forgotten.

Speaker 1: [02:24](#) But anyway, when we got here there was not an obvious plot. So we tilled it up. We spent some time that first year adding manure to the soil or rather composted manure and then raking it and smoothing it out. And there was a lot of trash. Our property kind of grew trash for the first few years because there was so many people who had buried junk here or just left junk outside and then the dirt had covered it up. So we were uncovering trash constantly. I spent a lot of time in my garden harvesting trash. But anyway, that was our first garden and it worked pretty darn good considering our soil is a little bit clay, but for the most part it's fairly nutritious. And the aged compost did a good job and I harvested quite a few crops there and I

mean I remember one year when I was bringing in squash and Pumpkins by the wheelbarrow load, so it was fine.

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It was great, there was nothing wrong with it. And there we were a couple years into that. I'd say maybe two to three years after that initial process, I kept adding manure composted in order to this toil or what I thought was composted manure. Now, my mistake number one was that some of the compost that I added was not well aged enough. So what happened is as we would clean out the barn, we would scrape up hay and manure and then put it in the pile. Well the pile one year wasn't old enough. So those hay seeds that were in the pile were still active. Right? So I put the compost on the garden and effectively seeded the whole darn thing with grass seed. So that year as everything started to come up, my garden plot began to look like a lawn. Ironically enough, it actually kind of almost looked better than my actual lawn because our lawn at that point was just clumpy prairie grass that we would try to mow.

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And the garden was being watered though, you know, it was a beautiful one, but I didn't want it in there in the garden in between the potatoes and the carrots of course. And so I was really frustrated because I couldn't keep up with it. I know you probably can relate where you spend two hours one day weeding and you look at what you got done and it feels like you barely made a dent in the weed issue. And it's really, really discouraging. So I started to look for some options, you know, how could I control these weeds? Spraying with herbicides was not an option. I don't do roundup or any other chemicals in my garden, not even on the table. So I had to figure out an organic way to deal with this grass slash weed problem. So I started to look and explore and I just so happened to stumble upon a book by a lady named Ruth Stout.

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Now this book, I believe was written in the 70s so it was an older book and I actually inherited it from my grandpa's estate. And I started to thumb through this musty old hardcover and I was completely enamored by the method that Miss Stout was explaining. So she recommended the deep mulch method, which is pretty much just what it sounds. You cover your garden with a deep, thick layer of mulch. And when I say thick, I'm talking 10 to 12 or even more inches of mulch material. Now the difference between this method and just regular old mulching is most of the time folks don't use this much. But Ruth said that you need to basically bury your garden and mulch before you plant. And then when it comes time to plant your rows, you just push the mulch away. You expose a little bit of soil plant in this

soil and then the idea is that the mulch will keep the weeds, suppressed between the rows.

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It made sense to me. And the one issue that I was concerned about was that she recommended that you use hay or Straw as mulch. And I kind of was nervous about putting a ton of Hay on my garden again, right? Because I had just seeded it with grass seed and I didn't want to get into that problem of more grass seed in my garden. But Ruth was very, very clear in saying that if your layer is deep enough, the grass seeds in the hay that you're using will not be able to germinate. So I kind of figured at that point, what did I have to lose? You know, I was already dealing with a garden that felt completely out of control. And so that next spring we tilled the garden for one final time and I scrounged up a big round bale of kind of old, musty hay that we didn't want to feed our animals.

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Now at that point, the neighbors thought I had completely lost my mind. Then I had Christian pick up the bale with our tractor and kind of hang it over the edge of the garden fence and I proceeded to pitch fork that hay all over the entire thing. And yes, there were a few moments during that process that I doubted my sanity just a little bit because I had this beautiful soil and I was just piling it with Hay. But there I was, the deed was done and I started to plant though we pulled back the mulch and put the seeds in the soil and low and behold, everything came up beautifully. And I didn't have as many weeds like ahead a few weeds. I'm not saying it was a completely weed free zone, but I had far fewer weeds than I had before and I also loved how the Mulch was keeping the soil damp and healthy and I started to see more worms present, which is a really good thing more than ever before.

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I just loved the results I was getting. So I became a deep mulch convert. At that point I was obsessed with the method. I swore to never go back to the old way and I continued with deep mulch for, I believe it was two more years after that initial year. So year three there we were. I had planted my garden, I put my seedlings in. I was proceeding with the same old method I had used for the last few years. It was giving me great results with this mulch and I noticed something a little strange happening with my tomatoes. The leaves were curling and looking thick. Now. It wasn't the type of curling that happens when you don't water them enough or they have bugs. It was like the stems and the leaves were like actually getting beefier but they didn't look healthy and they would twist and kind of look mutated.

Speaker 1: [09:51](#) And then I noticed that when the plants should have been starting to get fruit on them, there was nothing happening, there was not a tomato to be seen. I knew something was wrong at that point. When I started to do some research, I looked at different bugs. One friend thought potentially there was maybe thought too much salt in my soil and so I thought well maybe I added manure cause sometimes that can cause high salt and hurt plants. That really, we crossed that off the list pretty quickly. It didn't look like any sort of the diseases that I would see online, the pictures of diseased tomato plants. They didn't look like that. I just kept thinking what on earth is happening? And then one day I stumbled upon a blog post of someone who had the same exact tomatoes that I did, or lack of tomatoes and curling tomato leaves, the rather, and she said her issue resulted in using mulch that had been sprayed with a very potent category of herbicides called Aminopyralids.

Speaker 1: [11:03](#) And the light bulb went off. And I knew right then and there what had happened. So I dug a little bit more into where we had purchased the mulch or the Hay that we had used as mulch. And I learned that that farmer had sprayed that area with this type of herbicide. Once I started looking at this symptoms, it was dead on Aminopyralids will not completely kill a plant. And that was right on target with what I was seeing because my tomatoes weren't dead. They just looked bizarre. So Aminopyralids will cause thickening curling and they will prevent the plant from putting on fruit. And that's exactly what was happening. So at that point I knew that I had basically poisoned my garden with a ton, a literal ton of Hay mulch that was not helping me. It was actually hurting me, so I think I may have cried a little bit at that point because it felt like this impossible situation that I was never going to be able to rebound from and then Christian and I started discussing, you know, how are we going to fix this problem?

Speaker 1: [12:19](#) How are we going to come back from this? Because you know the garden is covered in Hay. The research I was reading said that that herbicide takes two to three years to break down so it could technically be present in our soil and the residue could be around for quite awhile and not gardening for three years wasn't an option. So we knew we had to do something different. Now at that point we had kind of been tossing around the idea of a garden remodel, if you will. For a while we had been using that initial plot that we started when we bought our property, but we were ready to expand or upgrade or just do something a little different because there were a few things I didn't like about it. It felt like the plot was a little small, there was a tree growing in the middle of it, which initially felt like it

would be really cool and kind of cozy and have this secret garden feel.

Speaker 1: [13:14](#) It actually ended up being a pain because it shaded a portion of the garden, cut into my space and it had thorns on it. So every time I was around the tree raking or weeding, I'd get poked with the thorns. We knew that we had to or would like to do something different. So we tossed around our options and the one that kept coming up again and again was raised beds. Now initially we had avoided raised beds because of cost and or the intricacies of building them. Raised beds, the simplest construction would just be boards, wood boards. That doesn't take a lot of time to create, but they don't last a long time. We knew we didn't want to go the wooden board route because we wanted something we would not have to rebuild year after year.

Speaker 1: [14:12](#) We started looking at some other construction materials and we never could quite settle on what we wanted, either it wasn't available or it was really expensive. And ultimately we found a sort of steel called bridge decking steel that we had access to that Christian thought would be a great option. Once we figured out on materials, we decided this actually might be our saving grace. The reason we decided to take the plunge into raised beds was primarily to give us fresh soil because I knew that that original garden was probably contaminated. And even if it wasn't, it didn't have a great way to know for sure and it just wasn't worth it for me to go ahead and plant as normal the following year and then wonder in the back of my mind if it was going to be a complete and total waste of time.

Speaker 1: [15:08](#) We decided to start from scratch and put in raised beds. We ripped out the fence and we proceeded to basically double the footprint of our garden. We had to do some leveling. We brought in a some equipment and leveled the plot out. And the good thing about that was not only did I have a flat garden spot now, but it actually helped to disrupt the soil and we were able to move and get rid of some of the contaminated soil. So once we leveled the soil, we started building our beds and I'll probably do another podcast episode with all of the construction details, but for now, let me just tell you, we use the bridge deckings deal with four by four posts in the corners. And as at the time of the recording of this podcast, we are in year three, I believe of the raised beds and I'm really, really glad we went with them.

Speaker 1: [16:07](#) It has been a great choice for us. I love them because they keep things tidy and organized. I think that's probably one of the

biggest things for me, which might sound silly to some of you, but I like being able to know, you know, this bed is for cucumbers, this one and this one are for tomatoes. And it just keeps things in my brain with how my brain works. More compartmentalize and organized. It's also a little easier to weed just because the beds are elevated. I don't have to bend over as far. And the rows where, you know in the previous garden there was rows that we would have to hoe or have to deal with with hand weeding. Our rows now are covered with landscape fabric and bark throw and we're walking on them. So that helps to suppress the weeds and all I really have to deal with are the weeds within the raised beds themselves.

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It doesn't eliminate weeds completely, but it definitely reduces the weeding time I'm doing right now. Raised beds are also handy because they can heat the soil up faster. And this is really going to be important only depending on your unique climate. With us, we have a short growing season that usually doesn't start til about Memorial Day. I don't plant my sensitive things until Memorial Day. For some of my other crops, maybe Greens or peas, some of those early spring veggies, I can put those in. But they only grow if the soil is at the proper. And with the raised beds they just heat up a little bit faster than the actual ground. So that's a benefit. Now if you live in a very hot climate, this might actually kind of work against you because they're going to be warmer and potentially they will evaporate the moisture more quickly or drain too much.

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So I kinda tell folks, if you live somewhere like Arizona or Texas where you struggle with really, really hot summers and that's your biggest issue, you know ours is snow and frost, yours is heat and those extreme temps raise beds might not be a great fit because they do drain and you're going to have to water a bit more frequently, especially if it's very, very warm. Now on the flip side, if you live in a place that's foggy and wet in cooler and you have damp, heavy soils, that's going to help with drainage. So that could be a huge benefit for you. You just really gotta look at your situation and know what you're dealing with in terms of climate and soil that you can make an educated choice. So for watering what we did, because I knew that if I just used my previous sprinklers setup was just, you know, had a sprinkler for the whole thing, that would waste a lot of water because there's a lot of walkways and rows in between my beds.

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So we built in a drip system into each bed in Christian, just ran pipes underneath the ground or underneath the beds as we were placing them and filling them with soil. And we have everything on a timed drip system, which, let me tell Ya, has

been pretty much the best thing that's ever happened to me because I don't have to remember to water. And miraculously enough, when you grow, when you water things, they like actually grow. Who would've thought? So things are growing much better than they used to. Mostly because they're getting watered and it doesn't take a lot. We have the beds, there's 20 of them. We have them set into three zones and little sprinkler heads in each bed. There's four sprinkler heads on each bed, just little teeny ones. And they run for about three minutes in each zone, uh, twice, two or three times a day. It doesn't take a lot of water. Everything's very much folks, the officially, and it works really, really well if we're on vacation or if we're busy cause there's always lots going on and everything has been very, very like clockwork and very happy because it's getting water.

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So all in all, it's been a great fit for us. And I find myself actually enjoying the garden maybe even a little more than before just because it feels manageable to me instead of like I'm always behind and I'm losing the weed war and bonus. It looks pretty cool. And some of you have seen pictures of the beds, on my various social profiles or blog and I just love the aesthetics of it. It's unique, it's different. They look pretty stunning when all the vegetables are flowing over the sides. And I like them. I'm a raised bed enthusiastic now. So all of that being said, a few things that I don't love about the raised beds because there's always pros and cons. So I think the biggest thing that's been a little bit of a pain is when we do need to amend our beds, whether adding more soil or adding mulch or adding more compost, we kind of have to do that the tedious way and just bring a wheelbarrow in, wheel it down the rows, which can be a little awkward trying to turn it around, and then just fork it in there or shovel it in there, which just takes a little time.

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So this year, our third year has been the first time I've had to actually add a little bit more soil just because of settling. We had a few beds, not all of them that were just beginning to just decrease a little bit over time, which is normal. So we got some top soil and added a bit more to top them off. It took a little bit of work and when we got it done, it wasn't horrible. I broke it up into several days, but it took some time because we were doing each bed and each shovelful by hand, the same goes for compost. Um, we had our soils tested, we found out our nitrogen content was pretty high. So I'm not adding any more composted manure this year, but in years past, you know, I would add a load, one new load per bed and it took a little bit of time.

- Speaker 1: [22:35](#) The other thing to consider is when it is time to plant and you need to work up the soil or you can't really tell it because it's can't get a rototiller up into a raised bed. You have to do that by hand. So again, the first two years, the soil, because it's not being walked on, which is another benefit of raised beds, is less compaction because it's not being stepped on. We didn't have to do much digging or hand digging or turning up the soil. It was all very loose and kind of fluffy. Now, year three, we've just had things get a little more settled. So I did go into each bed this year in May and between snow storms and dig up the beds by hand with my shovel, work at any clods, get rid of the rocks and just kind of get everything loosened up to prepare for planting.
- Speaker 1: [23:28](#) That took a little time because I wasn't able to use a rototiller. I don't think a broad fork would really fit in our beds. They're just not quite big enough. So it was me and my trusty shovel, which again wasn't the end of the world. I turned on a podcast when I was shoveling and I kind of considered it my workout for the day cause I would get work up a sweat, you know, do a couple beds at a time. It was a good workout but it took some time. So I feel like there's a tradeoff with the time I've saved in weeding and watering, maybe spending a little more time in bed prep every other year or so. But all in all, I think they've been a great fit for us. And as we wrap up, just as you're thinking about your gardening situation and your homestead situation, there's really not a right or wrong answer when it comes to raise beds and the main factors for you to consider as you're trying to make this decision.
- Speaker 1: [24:21](#) If you're pondering the idea I would say would be consider your climate. Look at you know, how hot or how cold are you. If you're already struggling with keeping your garden wet enough, raised beds might not be a good fit. Also, look at your soil. If you have heavy clay soils that tend to not drain very well, raised beds could be a really good fit for you. On the contrast, if your soils drain really quickly, raised beds, promote more drainage on top of that, so you're going to struggle with keeping those beds watered sufficiently. Also, look at materials that you have access to. There's millions of ways to build raised beds and tons of really creative ideas online. For us, the material choices came down to cost and durability. Probably durability was the biggest one. This field that we use was not exactly cheap, but when we priced out treated lumber or maybe lumber like redwood that would not rot after a year or two, the price actually ended up being pretty comparable.
- Speaker 1: [25:35](#) And I pretty sure these raised beds will last until Armageddon cause they're pretty darn tough. And this steel is not going

anywhere. However, you might not have access to that sort of steel in your area. You might have to improvise with different woods or maybe even things like cinderblocks or you know, stuff like that. So take into account the cost and the Labor involved and definitely factor that into your decision making. So if you're curious about what my raised beds look like or you're just wanting a few more details about how we put ours together, I have a raised bed guide, complete with pictures and specifics that I put together just for you. Now you can grab it for free and get instant access at [theprairiehomestead.com/raisedbedguide](http://theprairiehomestead.com/raisedbedguide). And I'll drop that link in the show notes so you can click over there and grab your guide. And that's it. My friends. Thanks for listening. If you have a minute, I'd be so honored if you would subscribe to this podcast and a quick review over on iTunes so more people can find us and enjoy this amazing homestead life and I will catch up with you on the next episode of the old fashioned on purpose podcast.