

HERB SPIRAL

THE ULTIMATE RAISED BED



By Michael Judd

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Benefits

There are many benefits to planting an herb spiral raised bed garden:

- Fantastic year-round edible landscape architecture
- Creates micro-climates for your favorite herbs and veggies
- Easy and fun to build
- Space and water saver
- High productivity in a small space
- Can fit anywhere, even on patios

Why the Spiral?

The garden spiral is like a snail shell, with stone spiraling upward to create multiple micro-climates and a cornucopia of flavors on a small footprint. Spirals can come in any size to fit any space, from an urban courtyard to an entire yard. You don't even need a patch of ground, as they can be built on top of patios, pavement, and rooftops. You can spiral over an old stump or on top of poor soil. By building up vertically, you create more growing space, make watering easy, and lessen the need to bend over while harvesting. To boot, spirals add instant architecture and year-round beauty to your landscape: the perfect garden focal point.

One of the beauties of an herb spiral is that you are creating multiple micro-climates in a small space. The combination of stones, shape, and vertical structure offers a variety of planting niches for a diversity of plants. The stones also serve as a thermal mass, minimizing temperature swings and extending the growing seasons. Whatever you grow in your spiral, it will pump out a great harvest for the small space it occupies. I've grown monstrous cucumbers in my large garden spiral, with one plant producing over 30 prize-size fruits. The spiral is a food-producing superstar!

Habitat

Stacked stones create perennial habitat for beneficial critters, such as lizards and spiders that help balance pest populations in the garden. The stone network is a year-round safe haven for beneficial insects and other crawlies that work constantly to keep your garden in balance— and you in the hammock. A little design for them up-front pays big, tasty dividends later.

Spiral Construction

There are two basic approaches to building a spiral: dry stack and free form.

Dry Stack

Materials for a Dry Stack Spiral, Six-Foot Diameter

- ▣ 90 granite blocks
- ▣ Cardboard
- ▣ 1 cubic yard soil/compost mix

Dry stacking refers to a free-standing structure of stone carefully placed to hold form without concrete. Dry stacking the rock has the advantage of the spiral staying put (not shifting), allowing you to create an herb spiral in a tight or formal setting. Cut granite blocks work well for dry stacking when the spiral has a diameter of five feet or more. An alternative to granite block is any kind of stackable stone, such as slate flagstone, cut wall stone, or even brick, which can help shape a smaller diameter spiral.



This small dry stack spiral is approximately three-and-a-half feet wide by two feet high.

LAY IT DOWN, DRY-STACK STYLE

Lay down cardboard in an area one foot larger than the diameter of the intended finished spiral. Cardboard kills grass under the spiral, helps prevent weeds from growing around the spiral's edge, and creates a ring for mulch when you're done creating your spiral.

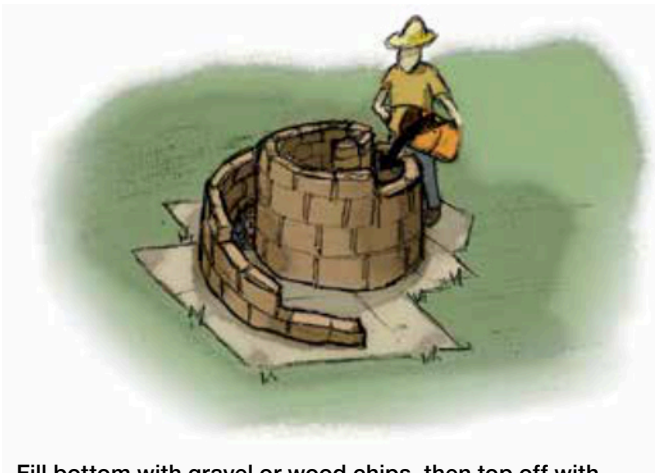
You can start by drawing a spiral on the cardboard, or you can simply begin laying out the first layer of block in the shape you're after. Be sure the spacing allows for the final planting bed width, which needs to be at least 8 inches wide. Ideally, the lowest point faces north and the spiral builds clockwise. While this layout and direction is helpful, it is not essential. I often choose my starting point based on the site and aesthetics. The design in the picture series here is approximately six feet in diameter by three feet high. Every two-and-a-half blocks, begin the next layer known as a 'course' in masonry terms for at least four courses, to gain your eventual height. This stepping up is easily understood once you start laying the stone.



Dry stack layout.



Dry stack winding up.



Fill bottom with gravel or wood chips, then top off with soil/compost mix.

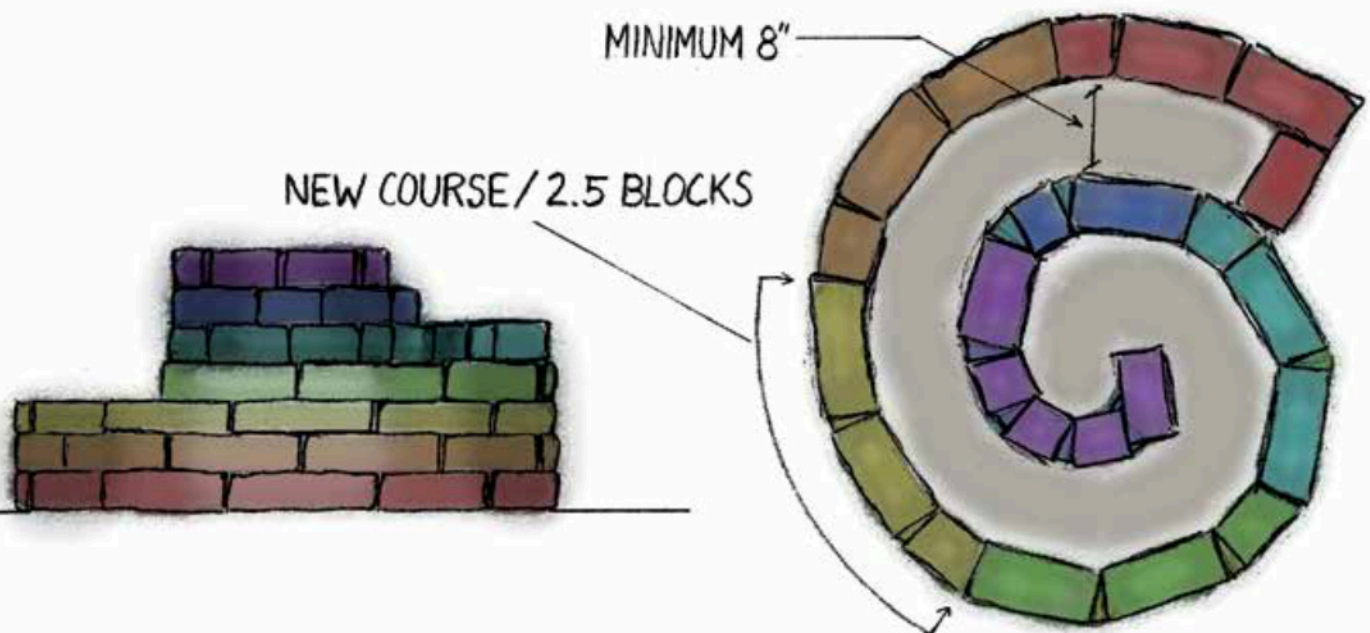


Viola! Dry stack ready to plant.

Since we are making a round spiral out of square blocks, the innermost part of the spiral gets tight and a little tricky. I use broken bits of block, pieces of brick, and whatever else I can get my hands on to recycle and reuse, making the innermost turns. Visually, it doesn't matter because it will not be seen in the end. For the final twist at the top, I like to end it off with a few hand-picked quartz stones or whatever small colorful stone I can find. The finished dry stack may still be a little wobbly. To add more support, I fill the bottom of the herb spiral's center with gravel or wood chips; this also helps with drainage and prevents water from collecting and heaving when frozen. Then, I either make or order a soil mix that is about 40% compost to 60% soil and fill it the rest of the way to the top of the spiral. If any blocks are loose or leaning outward, I tuck them in toward the soil. And, voila! Your herb spiral is ready to plant.

Do not worry if you don't get a perfect spiral or rounded curves; most imperfections are lost in the overall charm and uniqueness of your spiral. Surprisingly, soil does not come flushing out the cracks, and the little that does makes a good rockery planting.

Note: You can cap the bottom with a cross-set stone or just let it flow out into a surrounding garden. Another option for the bottom end is to put in a little frog pond or depression; a neat way to do this is to bury a metal bucket so the lip is flush with the ground and fill it with water.

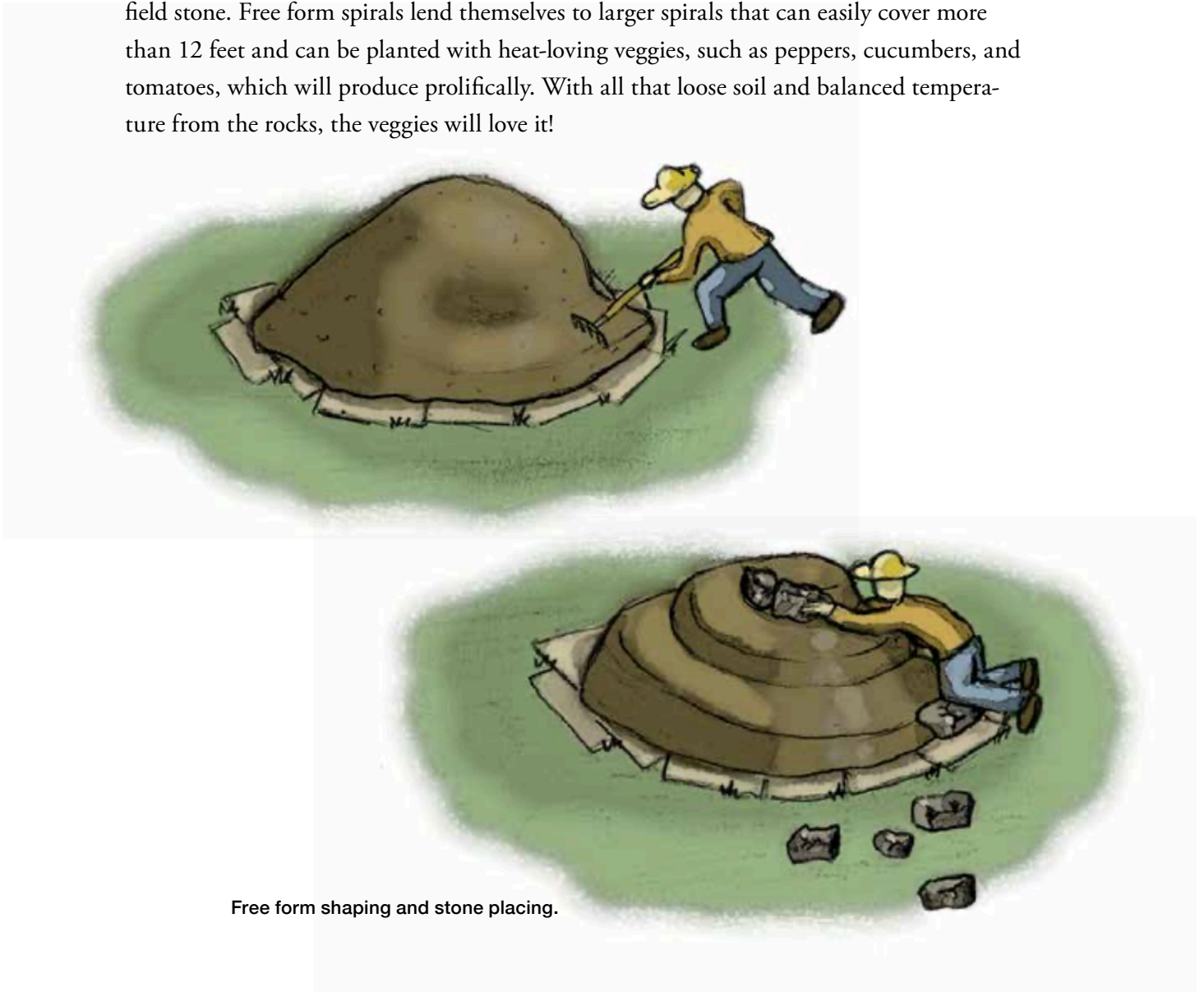


Free Form

Materials for a Free Form Spiral, Eight-Foot Diameter

- ▣ 1 pallet of wall stone (1.5 ton)
- ▣ Cardboard
- ▣ 4 cubic yards soil/compost mix

The easiest way to build a spiral is the free form way. Simply create a mound of mixed soil and compost (60% soil, 40% compost), shape it into a spiral, and fit the stones into the spiral. The downside to this design is that the structure can shift as soil settles and freezes. But it uses less stone and offers flexibility in the type of stone used, such as round field stone. Free form spirals lend themselves to larger spirals that can easily cover more than 12 feet and can be planted with heat-loving veggies, such as peppers, cucumbers, and tomatoes, which will produce prolifically. With all that loose soil and balanced temperature from the rocks, the veggies will love it!



Free form shaping and stone placing.



Shaping the free form spiral.



Robert Strasser stacking it up with Chulo Dog guarding.



Free form spiral sittin' pretty.

HOW TO START FREE FORMIN'

Free form spirals can be really big—even big enough to walk right into them. Or they can be compact enough to fit into the garden. If you go big, just plan to place in stepping-stones on the beds to reach the center; or if you go really big, make a walking path up the bed. An advantage of free form stone stacking is that you can lean the stones into the soil, which supports them easily without a perfect dry stack balance and allows a broader range of stones to be used, like the funky found stone design shown on page 17.

Note: I tend to make my free forms tall in expectation of some sinking; for any designs five feet or larger in diameter, plan at least three feet in height.

The spiral picture series here was built as a centerpiece to a butterfly meadow and measures approximately 12 feet in diameter by three feet in height. Six yards of premixed soil and compost were dumped right on site. Chocolate Grey Stone, one-and-a-third pallets weighing approximately 4,000 pounds, were also dropped right on site. If you cannot get materials dropped right on the site, try to get them as close as possible, or you're going to be doing a lot of wheelbarrowing, which is still well worth the spiral gem you'll have when done. Likewise, you can hand-mix the top soil/compost and use whatever stone you may have laying around.

After laying down cardboard and taking bed width into consideration, I begin "ramping" the soil at the chosen low-end point, rising slowly up as I round the pile. For the butterfly meadow spiral, the planting bed width is approximately 20 inches wide; for smaller designs, only go as narrow as eight inches. Have fun until you are happy with the spiral



Free form with found stone.

shape and bed width. Then, walk along the inside of the spiral, compacting where the stone will be laid. Also, feel free to leave the spiral to sit and settle for a few days.

Spread out your stones so you can pick and choose the right one for each spot. This is where those kindergarten puzzle-making skills finally come to fruition. The shape you raked out will dictate where and how high the stones need to be. The stones will lean in and onto the shaped spiral, offering support, which makes stacking a breeze. Start at the top or bottom and spiral down or up.

Planting the Spiral, Filling the Niches

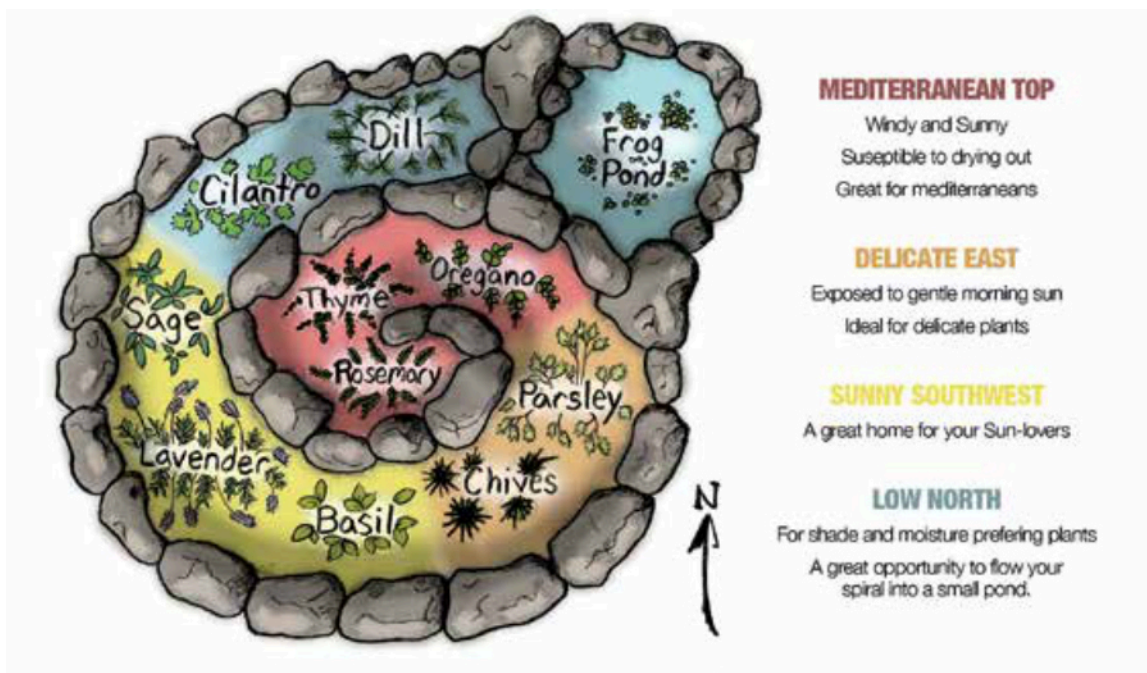
Exposed to the sun and wind, the top of the spiral is great for crowning with Mediterranean herbs, such as rosemary, thyme, and oregano. Coming down the spiral as it faces east and the morning light, we find a good place for more delicate plants, such as parsley and chives. Then around the sunny south and west sides, basil, lavender, and sages will do great. At the low, moist, north-facing side, cilantro and cress will thrive. To maximize the micro-climates, design the low side of the spiral end to face north.

With such a variety of niches, the spirals can be planted with just about anything. It does not have to be for only growing herbs or reserved for areas with lots of sun. Simply maximize on your location and plant interests.

Considerations

Do keep in mind that with all the stone and raised height, the spiral can dry out faster than a traditional ground-based garden. The smaller dry stack designs tend to dry out easily, given the soil-to-stone ratio. The larger free form spirals are basically a huge pile of soil and will retain more moisture. If worried about the spiral drying out, just focus on planting Mediterranean herbs, which can take the drought, no problem. In winter, I just mulch over the beds or let the herbs perennialize. Either way, it keeps an attractive visual interest in your landscape through all the seasons.

Don't feel a need for rock skill or perfection, no two spirals are alike! Just jump in, stack it up, plant, harvest, and enjoy!



Raspberry Thyme Tom Collins

INGREDIENTS - MAKES 1 DRINK

- ▣ 1/3 cup raspberries
- ▣ 2 sprigs of thyme
- ▣ 1/4 cup good dry gin
- ▣ 3 tsb sugar
- ▣ 1/4 cup water
- ▣ Juice of one lemon
- ▣ Tonic to taste

PUT IT TOGETHER

Heat the sugar and lemon in water, stirring constantly until the sugar has dissolved. Allow to cool.

Remove the thyme leaves from the stems and mash together with the raspberries. Save a few leaves and berries whole to garnish later.

Stir together the mash and sugared water while still warm. Cool to room temperature.

Shake the mixture with the gin, pour over ice, and add tonic. Mix in a few extra whole berries and garnish with leaves of thyme.

Sip and contemplate the magnificence of your herb spiral.





THANK YOU!

We hope you've enjoyed this short intro chapter into the world of edible landscaping. It gets much more delicious the more you explore..

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Blessings, Michael & Ashley Judd

A collage of four promotional images. The top-left image shows the 'FRUIT PATCH' logo, a stylized tree, and the text 'THE FRUIT PATCH APP IS A PART OF THE FOOD FOREST TRANSFORMATION NETWORK'. Below this is a map of the United States with various fruits and plants scattered across it, and a 'GET THE APP' button. The top-right image features a close-up of mushrooms with the text 'GROW GOURMET mushrooms', 'MINI COURSE', and 'WITH FUN-GI MICHAEL JUDD'. A circular inset shows Michael Judd with a surprised expression. The bottom-right image shows Michael Judd holding two green paw paws, with the text 'FOR THE LOVE OF Paw Paws ONLINE COURSE WITH MICHAEL JUDD'. A hand icon points towards the course information.

WHO IS MICHAEL JUDD?

Michael Judd has worked with agro-ecological and whole-system designs throughout the Americas for over two decades, focusing on applying permaculture and ecological design. His projects increase local food security and community health in both tropical and temperate growing regions. He is the founder of Ecologia Edible & Ecological Landscape Design, Project Bona Fide, an international nonprofit supporting agro-ecology research, and co-founder of SilvoCulture, a Maryland based nonprofit which is helping plant 1 million nut trees in the Mid-Atlantic region. He is also the author of For the Love of Paw Paws – book and online course.

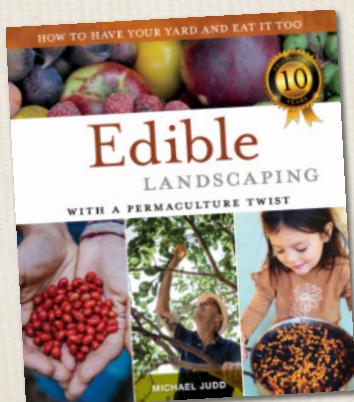
Michael lives with his family on a permaculture haven nestled along the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Frederick, Maryland. The Judds' homestead consists of 25 acres of mixed woodlands, food forests, gardens, and a nursery designed for experimentation and education.



Above: Michael Judd in a PawPaw Patch

Below: The Judd Homestead during PawPaw Fest

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