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Potted plants

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: My fingertips can barely touch the bottom of this hole. The roots will love that! (Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

This year I am running out of space to plant perennials.

I could put them in the forest with my fruit and nut trees, but they wouldn't benefit from the protective aegis of the Green Zone I've created around my annual beds and buildings. At this point they'd probably get eaten and I wouldn't notice for a week or two.

They could go in my raised beds, but those are needed for annuals and have a high rate of soil turnover. At 60% rotted cow manure, 20% sand and 20% peat, I've noticed that these beds lose about a quarter of their soil every growing season — organic matter consumed by vegetables in their own productions.

Finally, I looked at the earliest hügelkulturs I'd made. These "hill cultures" of buried wood and mounded topsoil were bald and crumbling from neglect, as I'd preferred to use new and improved methods. The surface organic material they'd contained and formed had washed away from lack of cover crops to retain it in off seasons.

Trying to dig in one, I found that only clay remained from its two years' service. Having grown ground cherries, garlic (at base) and kale, there was nothing I wanted to plant there. Rotational planting meant it wouldn't be available for garlic for six years and brassicas for four.

The ground was too hard for root crops, too hard even for shovels. Dig bars would only break it apart. The cycles of rain and harsh sun had baked it into a terracotta mound shot through with wood: terracotta is, after all, Italian for "baked earth." My hügel had become a pueblo! Instead of slowly subsiding into a rich bed of earth, it would be a petrified barricade for years to come and grow only the most hardy of weeds. The heat radiated by the baked clay reminded me of my Southwestern childhood.

In a flash I realized what I needed to do: convert it into a terracotta trough for heat-loving plants using the Slammer. The deep holes would retain water and the wood in the hügel would distribute it, rejuvenating the whole and maintaining the aim of reduced water use.

I'm always discovering uses for the Slammer. This heavy six-pointed manual sleeve-chisel has chopped through anything I've thrown under it for months. I found out about it from some bamboo growers, who use it to divide mature stands.

Imagine a jackhammer, but more precise and driven only by the operator's back and arms — which don't thrust, but only lift and drop it. Its own weight does the work most of the time, like a singlejack.

The Slammer punched effortlessly through the baked clay and wood. As I'd hoped, the hügel contained chambers perfect for filling with soil and compost. Some were almost 3 feet deep.

I planted starts of squash and cucumbers under a perennial layer of thicket beans, ground cherries and prickly pears on top. They responded well to the transplant and have indeed needed less water than expected. That water has also run into the hügel rather than off the sides, carrying what little soil hasn't already blown off.

The Slammer's potential for rehabbing our region's Puebloed hügel seems great. In addition to potting in a terracotta trough, one could punch water channels in where no plants can take hold. Done strategically, this could shape the hügel over the years of its descent.

I have new hope for this Eastern European planting method that has adapted a little clumsily to the South Sound. With a little chiseling, I might yet have a sculpture garden.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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