

Extension vegetable specialist Mike Orzolek discusses use of machine for laying trickle irrigation tape during University of Delaware field day program.

Raised beds improve vegetable production

GEORGETOWN, DE. — Small farmers trying for early yields from certain high-value commercial vegetable crops may benefit from growing their plants in raised beds. On flat ground the raised beds have several advantages, says University of Delaware extension vegetable specialist Mike Orzolek. The soil warms up faster in the spring, there's less wind erosion to damage young plants, and less standing water in the row.

Orzolek feels that raised beds are more effective than standard cultural practices on flat ground or black plastic mulch because they'll give you an earlier crop without the expense of the plastic or the labor of putting it down and later removing it. The technique works especially well for cucurbits like cucumbers. It may also be a viable alternative on eggplants, tomatoes and peppers.

This past summer, the specialist grew both cucumbers and eggplants at the University's Georgetown Substation under a variety of treatments aimed at

assessing the possible benefits of raised beds vs. plastic mulch or conventional cultural practices on flat ground.

Altogether there were six different treatments in his demonstration plot: (1) raised beds made in the fall preceding planting with a double disk bedder, (2) raised beds made in the spring with a double disk

bedder, (3) beds made in the spring with a double disk bedder followed by a bed shaper, (4) plowed and disked rows on flat ground, (5) plowed and disked rows on flat ground covered in the fall by black plastic mulch, and (6) plowed and disked rows covered by plastic in the spring.

Drip irrigation was used on all treatments and plants

were fertilized as needed over the growing season through the trickle lines.

Cucumber seeds were planted May 5 and May 12 a foot apart in rows six feet apart. Eggplant transplants were set out on all treatments May 16 and May 23. Plants were set every two feet in rows six feet apart.

Orzolek found that both the plastic mulch and the raised beds improved yields with little difference between these two treatments — at least on cucumbers and eggplant. This suggests that growers could save themselves both time and money in some cases by abandoning

the plastic in favor of raised beds.

Black plastic does have the advantage of reducing weeds in the row. But it costs about \$100 an acre to put down and must be removed at the end of the growing season. The fall-laid mulch appeared to perform as well as that laid down in spring. But it has a tendency to blow under extremely high winds, so be sure to anchor edges adequately with soil to keep it from tearing, he says.

Eggplants grown on raised beds did very well but tended to develop some rot where fruit touched the ground. On the other hand, the crop was

easier to pick than when plants were grown on plastic. These grew so large they tended to spread beyond the plastic anyway, in some cases also developing rot where fruits touched the ground.

The specialist reported a slight advantage to making raised beds in December of the preceding year so that soil had a chance to settle before spring. This resulted in less sand blasting from heavy winds when the crop was planted. Beds shaped then also appeared to have fewer weed problems. What weeds did develop

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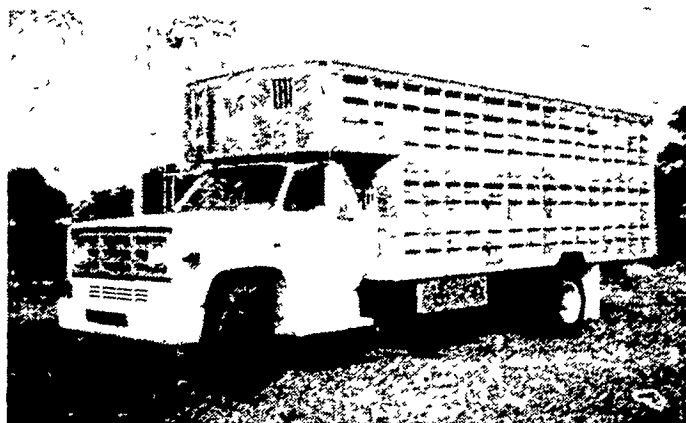
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