

Gardening on the Contour 1988

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Soil Conservation Service

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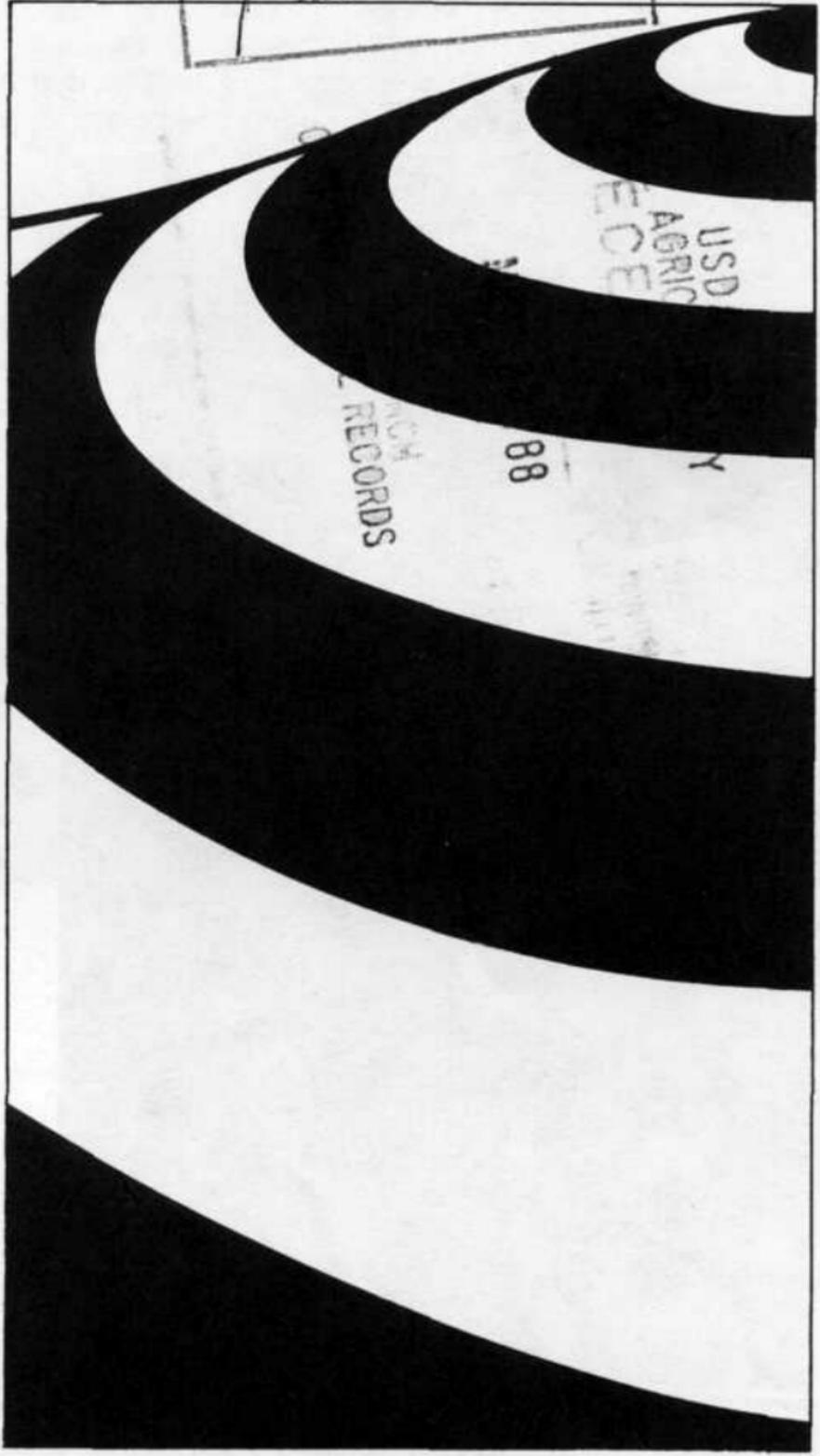
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Number 179

Gardening on the Contour

By the Soil Conservation Service

Does rainwater from your neighbor's property drain onto your garden? Is your garden on a slope so that water rushes off and is lost to the plants, taking soil with it? Is your garden on a steep slope where you want to plant perennials, shrubs, or azaleas? If so, you should think seriously of planting on the contour or perhaps building a terrace.

A contoured or terraced garden does not erode. Because water is channeled across the slope instead of down, the soil absorbs more rainwater and is less susceptible to drought. Contouring not only controls erosion but also distributes water evenly. This pays off in better yields and higher quality vegetables or flowers.

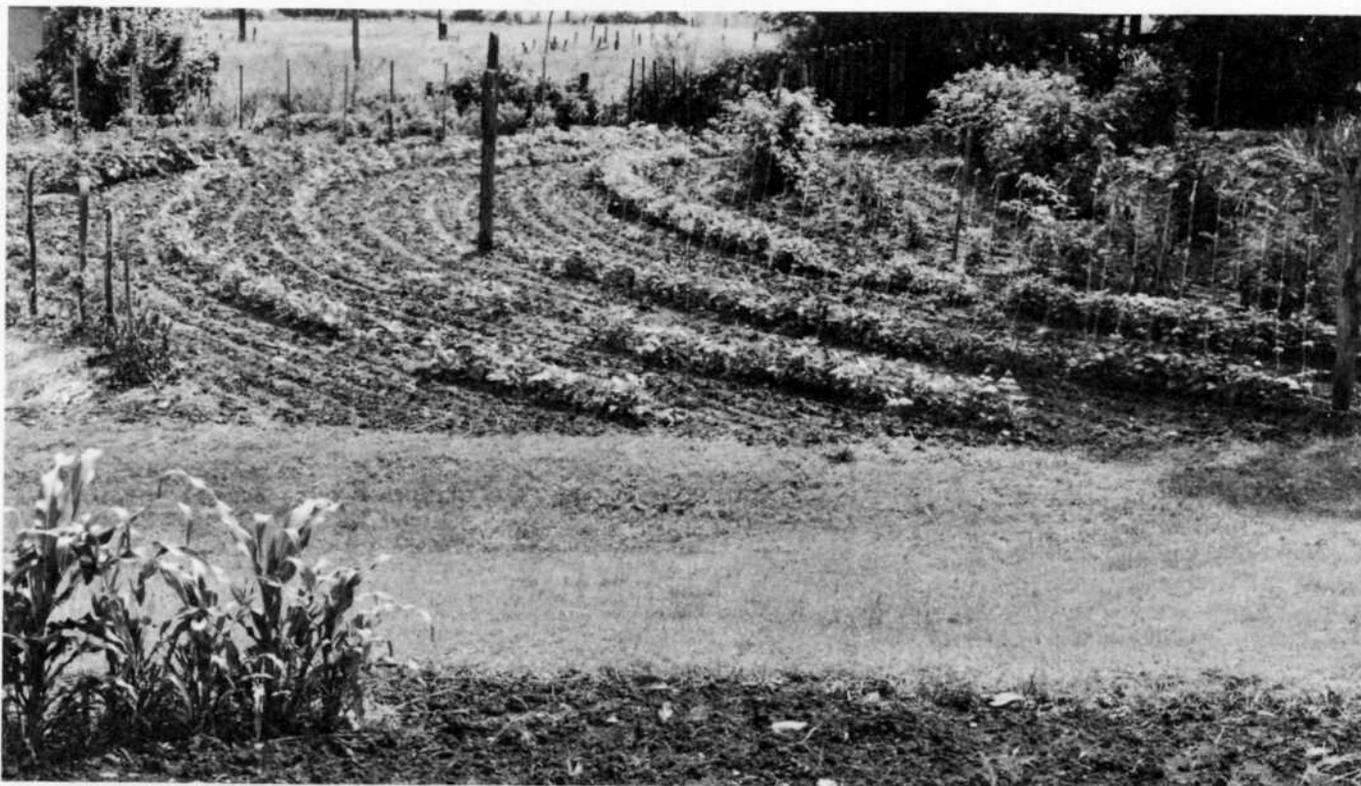
To contour your garden, follow the natural lay of the land. It does not require special skill or equipment to find the contour line. A level can be improvised from materials on hand—an efficient device can be made from an ordinary carpenter's level mounted on a 2 by 4. To determine a level line begin about the center of the slope. Lay the 2 by 4 along the slope and move one end up or down until the bubble on the level is centered; mark the spot with a stake. Repeat this process across the slope to establish the contour guide line. Plant the rows of vegetables or flowers parallel to this line.

As you cultivate the garden, leave small channels between the rows to collect and hold the moisture so that it soaks into the soil.



PA-40897

Picking spinach grown in a contoured garden.



Contoured garden and grassed waterway.

WVA-833



Plan a contoured garden for vegetables or flowers.



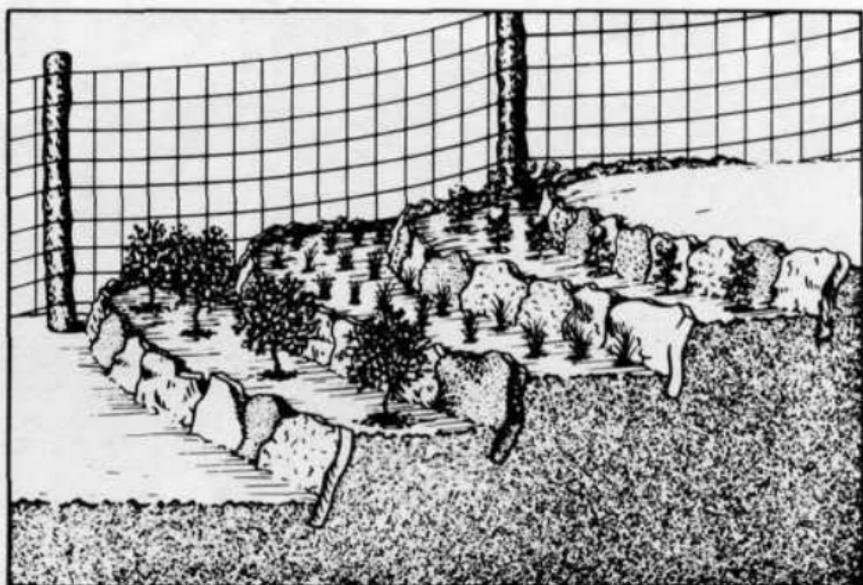
Use carpenter's level mounted on a 2 by 4 to lay out contour line.

If water from your neighbor's property drains onto your garden or if your garden is on a slope so that rainwater washes away the soil, a diversion terrace can divert the flow of water effectively. A terrace is simply a ridge with a shallow channel on the upper side. You can build it with a hoe and spade. Or, if your garden is large enough, you may use a garden tractor or larger equipment. Give the terrace a slight grade so that water does not stand in the channel but flows off gently. This water should flow onto a grassed area to prevent erosion. Make the terrace high enough to carry all the water that is intercepted. Make it wide enough so that you can work over it easily and so that it blends in with the natural shape of the land.



Terrace made of earth diverts water from upslope.

ORE-45028



Place flat stones on edge to terrace a steeply sloping garden for flowers or shrubs.

If your garden is on a fairly steep slope, consider building rock terraces. Unless you use rock terraces such as shown at left, the plants will lack moisture. Water runs off without soaking in, and even watering with a hose has little effect.

Beginning just below the top of the slope, place flat stones on edge in the soil to make small benches 2 to 4 feet wide, depending on the slope. Each bench should slant slightly toward the original slope. The water that is caught and held on these slopes will supply enough moisture to the plants. Because the water is held in check, no erosion occurs.

This kind of terrace requires a lot of stones and a lot of work in a large area, but it works well on short slopes. Slightly irregular stones are more attractive than bricks or blocks, which are pushed out of line easily by frost action.

For additional information see the local representative of the Soil Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

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