

*Stop fighting weeds
and start growing
food when you gar-
den Len's way*



thought out the details with thoroughness you would expect from a rocket scientist. His mix of growing medium for the beds, for example, is designed to give the plant everything it needs. "When you garden in the dirt, you probably don't know what nutrients and trace elements are there, and in what amounts," Len says. "I decided to start from scratch and build a perfect growing material."

There is no dirt or manure in the beds. "That's where weeds come from," Len says. "Spend your time growing food, not pulling weeds." The soil-less growing mixture includes such things as peat moss, rice hulls, and certified organic cotton burr compost. A liquid organic fertilizer mix that he calls Es-

Raised-bed revolution

When Len Pense sold his house in town, he bought a secluded 21-acre property on top of a mountain in the Missouri Ozarks. He planned to build his homestead up there and put out a garden that would help to feed himself and his extended family. There was just one problem. "I found out that, just because you buy land in the Ozarks, it doesn't mean that you're going to get any dirt with it," he quips. But he developed a way to garden on that rocky top. "It forced me to develop a method of organic raised-bed gardening that produces a lot of food, but no weeds," he says. "It's really been a blessing in disguise."

His series of raised beds, which grow everything from flowers to fruit and vegetables, may be secluded in the Ozarks, but they are no longer a secret. The world is beating a path to his door, which is near the small town of Strafford, Mo. They come to learn how to feed themselves by gardening Len's way.

Rocket science. Gardening Len's way looks pretty simple. The basic bed is made up of 64 standard concrete blocks that are arranged to make a 4-foot-long by 16-foot-wide raised bed. It doesn't look like rocket science. But Len, who has consulted with the military on projects ranging from ballistic missiles to futuristic deep-space defense systems, has

By Dean Houghton



sential Elements feeds the plants with necessary nutrients, including nearly four dozen trace ingredients. Yields are prodigious. Slice an heirloom tomato from Len's garden for a sandwich, and it is so large that it hangs over the sides of the bread. Kentucky Wonder pole beans grow skyward like Jack's proverbial bean stalk. "The gardening mixture provides a loose, well-drained environment that allows plants to thrive," Len says. "You're making your own Garden of Eden. And I'll be the original didn't have any weeds, either."

Spread the word. Although Len planned his gardens to be a place to get away from it all, it hasn't worked out that way. "This was not supposed to happen," says the 74-year-old. "At my age, I had no intention of starting a new business." But his method has turned into a cottage industry, serving folks who want to learn gardening from the ground up.

That rustic Ozark mountain cabin that he built near his beds now doubles as a class-

room on most weekends. He gets hits by the thousands on his Web site (www.gardeningrevolution.com), where folks can buy his book (*Gardening Len's Way*) or sign up for classes that cover everything from how to lay out a bed to how to raise a crop to best methods to preserve the harvest.

Demand for the growing medium and bed-making materials has grown to the point that Len has lined up six distributors across the country to help get materials to gardeners, and he's looking for more distributors. The Internet is helping spread his notoriety, as people from other countries express their interest in learning to grow enough food to provide for their family. "A single 4x16-foot bed can provide enough vegetables for two people nearly year-round, in most areas," he says. "You can grow four times the amount of produce per square foot that you would digging in the dirt, on only 10% of the effort. You just plant it, water it, and pick it." **H**

Left: Len Pense pulls out a stepladder to pick Kentucky Wonder pole beans. **Below:** His series of raised beds grow many kinds of vegetables, fruits, and flowers.

