

BUILDING RAISED BEDS

Raised beds are the ideal home for raising vegetables, herbs, and cutting flowers. By elevating the planting area above ground level, you make it easier to establish a garden in almost any conditions, improve the soil, extend your growing season, give roots room to spread out, increase your growing space, and create a healthy environment for all the beneficial soil-dwellers. While there are basic principles for building raised beds, you have lots of choices for how to finish them so you can find the right one for your resources, location, and style.

WHY

Tough Surfaces

With raised beds, you can plant a garden where the ground is too hard to dig or where the soil below it is not fertile or even is contaminated. A raised bed is like a large container with an open bottom—all the soil plants need is in the container, so you don't need to worry about what's beneath it.

Soil Care

Plants thrive in soil that is rich in organic matter, but it needs to be continually replenished as it decomposes. With raised beds, you can work organic matter (*ideally in the form of compost*) into the soil before you plant and spread a few inches on top of the soil throughout the growing season. You can also easily work in organic fertilizers and other soil amendments, such as alfalfa meal, rock phosphate, or greensand, as indicated by a soil test.

Warm Up

Soil in raised beds warms up earlier in spring and stays warm later into fall than it does at ground level. That means your growing season can begin sooner and lasts longer, which can add up to a big difference in your harvest.

Drained Dry

Constantly soggy soil is deadly to most garden plants. Raised beds drain quickly after heavy storms, reducing the risk of root rot and other fungal diseases.

Compaction Prevention

Walking on soil, especially clay soil, compresses it and closes off the pore spaces that allow water and oxygen reach plants roots. Once you build your raised beds, you can avoid ever stepping on your garden soil again.

Wider Deeper

The wider and deeper a plant's root system, the healthier it will be. Soil in raised beds stays loose, allowing roots to spread out and go down. Raised beds are especially helpful when you want to grow root crops, such as carrots or potatoes, which need room to reach their full size underground.

Structural Plan

Raised beds bring order to gardens, clearly defining where is the growing space and where are the pathways. They can also add a bit of style to your garden depending how you construct and place them.



BUILDING RAISED BEDS *continued*

HOW

Gardeners use many different strategies for creating raised beds, but the easiest way is to get topsoil either in bags or bulk. Then simply follow these steps.

- 1. Groom and trim.** If grass or weeds are growing where you want your raised beds, pull or dig out any large weeds, especially those with deep roots such as dandelions. Cut any remaining grass down to 1 inch with a mower or trimmer.
- 2. Define the beds.** Using stakes and twine, mark off the outline of each bed. The width of the beds should be no more than about 4 feet, so you can reach into the center of the bed from either side. You can make your raised beds squares (4 feet long) or rectangles of about 8 to 10 feet in length. If you're making several beds in one area, be sure to allow enough room between them for pathways wide enough apart for a wheelbarrow, garden cart, or lawn mower to get through. That's about 4 to 6 feet.
- 3. Frames or not.** Many gardeners make raised beds simply by mounding up soil 6 or more inches higher than the ground. This works well for growing long rows of crops or cutting flowers. Adding frames around raised beds helps minimize erosion and can make the garden look neater. You can use bricks, cinder blocks, stone, or hay bales to contain your raised beds, but the most popular material is wood. Be sure to use untreated wood—you don't want toxic chemicals leaching into your soil. The best choices are naturally rot resistant cypress or cedar, but if you use other types of wood you can replace it as it decays over time. Many nurseries and online retailers offer frame kits made from wood, metal, or recycled plastic that make it quick and easy for you to set up raised beds. You can also find pre-made connectors for wooden planks. Whatever you use, the frame should let you pile up the soil at least 6 inches high and up to 18 inches is ideal.
- 4. Base layer.** When setting up raised beds over grass or other vegetation, spread a layer of cardboard (*without colored ink*) at the bottom of your raised bed. The cardboard will smother the plants right away and gradually break down itself.
- 5. Soil mix.** To start your raised beds with the ideal planting medium for most crops, fill the frames with a mix of one part finished compost to two parts clean topsoil. If you don't have access to compost, mix in other kinds of organic matter such as grass clippings, leaves, or straw. These materials attract and sustain earthworms and other soil-dwelling creatures that create a healthy ecosystem for plants. The soil mix is likely to settle a bit after a few weeks, so be prepared to add little more.
- 6. Top off.** Cover the surface of your raised beds with a 3-inch layer of organic mulch, such as dried grass clippings, shredded leaves, pine needles, or straw. These types of mulches block weeds from sprouting, conserve moisture, and nourish the soil as they break down. Replenish as needed during the growing season.

