

RAISED BEDS



Maintenance

Raised beds reduce bending and stooping required for maintenance. In addition, raised beds are tended from the sides, eliminating the need for paths. This allows plants to be grown closer together reducing weed growth and competition.

Improved Drainage

Raised beds are especially beneficial to gardeners with poorly drained soils. Raised beds soils drain water away from plant root systems and promote better air exchange.

Expanded Growing Season

Because raised beds are above the ground, they warm earlier in the spring than in-ground beds. This allows for earlier planting and increased yields.

Better use of Space

Raised beds allow plants to be grown in areas where conventional beds are not feasible. Such areas include rooftops, concrete or patios, and hillsides that can be terraced with raised beds.

Raised Bed Materials

A raised bed may be made from a variety of materials including landscape timbers, railroad ties, concrete blocks, bricks and stones. While some recommend that pressure-treated lumber should not be used for raised beds, it has been shown this type of material does not affect plant growth. There is still debate, however, regarding the safety of fruits and vegetables grown in close proximity to pressure-treated wood. When in doubt, use untreated wood, or line the wood with heavy plastic to eliminate soil contact with the treated lumber.

Railroad ties are commonly used for raised beds. Select only ties that are at least two years old. New ties contain petroleum-based chemicals that can damage plants. If your ties are still secreting black, sticky substance or smell strongly, avoid them. These may still be used by lining the edges of the bed with heavy plastic as described above.

Redwood and cedar are both attractive and practical for raised beds because they are naturally rot-resistant. Boards or lumber made from recycled plastics are also available. Cinder blocks are another option for quick, inexpensive, and easy construction.

Constructing a Raised Bed

The length of a raised bed is not critical, although it is recommended that an extremely long bed (greater than 10 feet) be divided into several shorter ones. The depth of the bed is also variable, but most flowers and vegetables require between 8 to 12 inches of soil for healthy root growth. If the soil below the bed is tilled and prepared, drainage is improved and roots may grow deeper than the bed itself. Bed width is a very important consideration. If the bed is to be maintained from one side only, the width should be no more than 2 ½ feet to retain a reasonable reaching distance. For a bed with access on both sides, the width should not exceed five feet.

Stakes can be used to support the walls and should be twice the height of the bed. Half of the length of the stake should be driven into the ground, while the other half serves as support for the wall. Railroad ties and

landscape timbers can be held in place with concrete reinforcing bar, spaced every four feet. Decay-resistant or treated stakes should be used to support wooden walls. Mortar is required for stone walls greater than two feet tall.

Soil Preparation

Before building your raised bed, it is beneficial to work the underlying soil to encourage good drainage. Root-tilling or hand digging can do this. This will encourage good root growth for those plants that root deeply.

The raised bed itself should be filled with good quality loamy topsoil. Amendments such as compost and aged manure will help improve the soil's tilth and fertility. A soil test should be done prior to planting.

Maintaining the Raised Bed

The maintenance of a raised bed is slightly different from a conventional in-ground bed. Because there is improved drainage in a raised bed, the soil will dry out quicker. In addition, raised bed soils will be warmer in spring and promote early seedling growth. Likewise they will be hotter in summer and tend to dry out. To avoid potential problems, mulch the plants with organic matter such as leaf mold or peat moss. These will both decrease moisture loss as well as keep the soil cooler. This organic material will also improve the soil quality as it decomposes. Raised beds should be fertilized in the same manner as conventional in-ground beds.