

## Raised Bed Gardening

### What Are Raised Beds?

Raised beds are 2-to-4-foot-wide growing areas. Crops are planted in raised beds without foot paths between each row of crops. Paths on each side of the raised beds let a gardener reach the middle of the bed to plant, weed, or harvest without stepping on the soil around plantings.

### Why Garden in Raised Beds?

- Water is applied to a smaller area, resulting in water conservation.
- Soil in beds stays loose and well aerated - ideal for plant roots.
- Creates a warmer micro-climate around cold sensitive plants and the soil warms up earlier in the spring.
- Paths around the beds keep feet clean because gardeners work in beds without walking in them; this eliminates soil compaction.
- Soil amendments, fertilizer and water are applied only to the beds, saving time and money.
- Weeding is easier; hand weeding and/or light hoeing are usually adequate.
- You can still have a garden even if you have a lot of rocks.

### Where to Locate a Raised Bed

- Choose a location that gets at least 6 hours of sunlight per day (the more the better).
- Place the garden away from tree and shrub roots, which will compete with vegetable plants for water and nutrients.
- Lay out beds so that the length will run north to south. This allows for minimum shading of short plants.

### How to Build a Raised Bed

**Bed Shape and Size:** Raised beds can be squares, rectangles, triangles or circles (most are rectangular).

- A 4-foot wide bed is comfortable for most gardeners to reach from either side. Make the bed narrower if children are helping, or if you can only reach from one side.
- Bed length can be as short or as long as you like, but eight feet is a convenient size.

**Open Mound Beds:** These are called unconstructed beds and do not have sides. An open mound bed may be raised above ground level 6 inches or more.

- Mark the bed with stakes and string. Use a rake or hoe to mound soil up in beds.
- Add soil amendments and fertilizers and spade in.
- Level the top of the bed with the back of a rake. Sides should slope at a 45-degree angle.

**Contained or Constructed Beds:** The choice of framework to use for walls depends on the availability and expense of the construction material, as well as the desired appearance of the final product in the landscape. Naturally rot-resistant lumber, such as redwood or cedar, may be used.

**Skill Level:** Beginner, to build a wood 4 x 4 foot raised bed

**Cost:** approximately \$19

Other possibilities for a raised bed include concrete blocks, bricks and stones, treated lumber or synthetic lumber made of recycled plastic.

The height of a raised bed can vary from six inches to a height that can be reached by a person in a wheelchair.

If additional soil is needed for these beds, "three-way mixes" can be bought from businesses listed under "Landscape Supplies" in the phone book.

#### **Amending the Soil:**

- Amend soil in beds with organic matter to improve the soil. Use peat moss, bagged steer manure or compost in the spring.
- Spread approximately 3 to 4 inches of amendments over the beds and spade or rototill in 8 to 12 inches deep.
- After harvest, chopped up vegetable matter and leaves as well as grass clippings can be spread over the beds and spaded in 8 to 12 inches deep.

#### **Paths between the Beds**

- 1½ to 2-foot wide paths are comfortable walking spaces for most people.
- If you plan to push a wheelbarrow along the paths, make the path wide enough to keep wheelbarrows from damaging plants. The same applies if area will be used by a person in a wheelchair.
- Grass paths must be mowed. Measure the width of the lawn mower and make your path a size that makes mowing convenient. Grass paths work better with contained beds, as the grass will invade open mounds.
- Paths can be bare dirt, which packs down as walked on each year.
- Paths can be mulched with layers of newspaper covered with bark or straw.
- For a more formal appearance, construct paths with bricks or cement.

#### **How to Maintain a Raised Bed**

Raised garden beds require very little maintenance; each spring or fall, top dress with fresh compost and/or manure. If your bed holds plants for only part of the year, dig the compost or manure into the top several inches of soil. As with any garden, mulching the top of the soil will help retain moisture and keep weeds down. Moisture retention is important, because raised beds tend to drain faster than conventional beds

Prepared by WSU-Pierce County Master Gardeners

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