

Raised Garden Beds

Raised garden beds offer some advantages over planting directly in the earth

Good Aeration and Drainage

Gardens need to hold moisture in the soil but they also need to drain. Soils in raised garden beds provide good aeration and drainage in contrast to the surrounding soil. Compaction from walking in and around a traditional garden is greatly reduced, keeping the soil structure in tact, an important factor for growing any type of plant.



Raised bed used at the Cape May County Earth Day celebration
Cape Atlantic Conservation District

More Control of Your Soil

Raised garden beds allow you to control and manipulate the soil composition, one of the reasons raised bed gardening is so productive. Raised beds are a good alternative where soils will not support a garden (shallow soil, steep slopes, poor soil quality). A good soil mix for raised beds would consist of equal volumes of garden soil, organic material (compost, peat moss, etc.) and porous material (sand or perlite). Avoid using ordinary garden or top soil alone as it may settle and compact, crust over, and shrink away from the frames .

Reduces Space and Work

Raised beds reduce the amount of space needed to grow vegetables since they do not need to be grown in rows. You can maximize the space because you are able to plant closely, allowing for a maximum crop yield. Urban gardening, using raised beds, can be accomplished with a bit of planning and organization. These beds can be elevated above soil not suitable for plants.

Any weeds that spring up will be contained in the raised bed, diminishing the time you have to spend weeding the garden. In addition, because the bed is above the walkway, less stooping is required for maintenance and harvesting.

Care and Maintenance

Raised beds are adaptable with regards to size, soil, and location. This lends itself for growing a wide variety of plants. They are also useful for containing plants that spread aggressively, i.e., mints. The soil tends to dry out more rapidly due to the soil being raised and faster drainage. Two ways to combat this is to maintain high levels of organic matter and apply a light layer of mulch. Mulch also cuts down on weeds, maintains even soil temperature, and keeps your plants clean.

Watering is best done with a drip or soaker hose, not only for water conservation but, watering the plant from overhead, especially in the evening, may promote disease problems.



Drip or soaker hoses are the preferred watering method
Courtesy Frank Wertheim

Season Extenders

Gardeners almost inevitably want to extend the growing season. Raised beds, in general, warm up faster in the spring to begin with.

They also lend themselves being utilized as a season extender by installing row covers. Made of clear plastic supported by hoops (usually made of PVC pipe), these "mini-greenhouses" can provide some frost protection in the cooler months.



Logs can be used for framing
Courtesy green living ideas

Frames can be made from Different Materials

Recycled plastic-Cinderblocks- Rocks-Logs-Lumber

Packing crates make a quick and easy frame. Crates can often be found sitting at the curb, waiting to be hauled off to the landfill. Stacking two, three or more will create the height for your frame.



Packing crates rescued from the landfill
Cape Atlantic Conservation District

Turn these...

...into these



Crates stacked 4 high
Cape Atlantic Conservation District



Hoops are installed for season-extending row covers.
Courtesy Robinson Polytunnels

Construction

Framed raised beds may be made from stone, brick, wood, or even old logs. Wood containing creosote or compounds containing pentachlorophenol, i.e. pressure treated wood or railroad ties, should be avoided since the chemicals are toxic to plants or humans.

Frames should be between 6 to 8 inches high and 6 to 8 feet long. A width of 4 feet allows easy reach into the bed from either side. The higher the bed, 2 to 3 feet, the less bending you will have to do when being worked. 2 x 6 inch or 2 x 8 inch lumber works well and can be nailed and staked in the corners.

Maintaining a 2 to 4 foot isle between beds allows easy access with tools and equipment.



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