



Elevate Expectations with Raised Bed Gardening

Whether for convenience or accessibility, raised beds are a popular option for growing fruits, vegetables, or ornamental plants. Raised bed structures elevate the soil, and with it comes a variety of advantages for growing plants.

Advantages

Using raised beds allows gardening in soils where it may otherwise be difficult to grow plants, such as areas with poor drainage or compaction issues. Because these beds are raised above the ground, compaction shouldn't be an issue because there will not be any foot traffic on them.

Raised beds also have better drainage, and the soils warm up earlier in the spring compared to in-ground beds allowing an earlier start to the gardening season. Since the area is contained, there tend to be fewer weed problems, although this can vary depending on the soil used to fill the beds.

Raised beds can also provide those with accessibility concerns, such as individuals who use a wheelchair or have difficulty working at ground level, with gardening opportunities.

Disadvantages

While there are many advantages to raised beds, there are also some disadvantages to consider when planning.

- Raised beds must be constructed, which can come at a cost. Recycled materials are optional, but there is still added work to build them.
- Filling raised beds can be expensive, especially when building large garden beds.
- Some crops do not work well in raised beds. Sweet corn requires larger blocks of plants to ensure proper pollination, and large vining crops like pumpkins can overtake a bed.
- Raised beds tend to dry out faster than in-ground beds, so they will likely need to be watered more frequently.



Raised beds can be used to grow plants in areas where it may be difficult to grow plants, even on top of asphalt.

Photo: Ken Johnson

Building

Raised beds are often constructed with wooden boards. Cedar and cypress wood are commonly used because they are naturally rot-resistant. Alternatives to wood include materials such as cinder blocks, plastic lumber, and metal.

Pressure-treated wood is another option for constructing raised beds. Some people have concerns about using pressure-treated wood when growing food crops. Newer chemicals used in pressure-treating wood, such as micronized copper azole, CA, or alkaline copper quaternary ammonium, ACQ, are less toxic compared to previously used chemicals. Never use railroad ties, which have been treated with creosote, when constructing raised beds.

Raised beds are commonly built to be 6 to 12 inches tall but can be built taller. If constructing a raised bed with wheelchair access, they should be 24 inches tall. Raised beds should be no wider than 4 feet if they can be accessed on all sides. Otherwise, they should be no wider than 2 feet to reach everything in the bed without stepping on the soil. When constructing raised beds out of wood, reinforce the corners with corner brackets or pieces of wood.

Filling and Refreshing Soils

Fill raised beds with a 1:1 mixture of compost and garden or topsoil. Over time the compost or other organic matter used will decompose, which causes the bed to settle. Therefore, more soil and compost may need to be added to the bed each year. Explore more on refreshing soils in raised beds at go.illinois.edu/RefreshRaisedBeds

How much soil does a raised bed need? Multiply the length of the bed by the width and height, length x width x height, to get the raised bed's volume. When calculating, make sure to use the same unit of measure for all parts.

Example: 6' (L) x 3' (W) with 12" sides → (6'x3'x1') = 18 cubic feet of soil



Raised beds provide gardening opportunities to those with accessibility concerns, such as individuals who use a wheelchair or have difficulty working at ground level. *Photo: Getty Images*



Consider coming together and making raised bed gardening a community project. *Photo: Caniceus on Pixabay*

For more research-based information on gardening topics, contact a local Illinois Extension expert at go.illinois.edu/ExtensionOffice.

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