

- » Defining what a raised bed is
- » Looking at looks, sizes, depths
- » Determining what and how to plant
- » Caring for a raised bed

Chapter **1**

Creating Raised-Bed Gardens

Welcome to the wonderful world of raised-bed gardening! It's an easy and satisfying way to raise your own food, flowers, herbs, and more. Some people are drawn to it because they don't have the space or time for a big, ambitious garden. Others turn to raised beds because of the conditions outside their door, such as not enough space or lousy soil. Others appreciate that raised beds make gardening manageable and accessible. And some have heard that raised beds are more productive (this happens to be true).

This chapter serves as your entry point. My main goal is to lead you to success. Raised-bed gardening is totally doable and super-gratifying. You and your plants are going to love it.

Understanding How Raised-Bed Gardening Works

You may be wondering why raise gardening soil and plants above soil level. What's the point? How is it a step up from installing an in-ground garden? In these sections I explain. You can see that gardening in raised beds has plenty of worthwhile advantages.

Looking at the basics

A raised bed isn't an in-ground garden. By definition, it's on top of the ground. The ground below is cleared and leveled as much as possible, mainly so the bed — a bottomless box, a frame, if you will — can sit securely and also so water can pass through and drain away. The roots of your plants may or may not grow into the ground below. If the bed is meeting all their needs, they'll “be fine in the confines”!

For many veggies, flowers, herbs, and fruits, setting up in a sunny spot yields the best results. That's simply because so many of them are sun-lovers. Check out the chapters in Part 3 for all sorts of suitable plant suggestions (and if there's part-day shade, I mention some plants that don't mind).

That's it, really: choose a level, sunny spot, fill it with good soil mix, and off you go!

Considering scope

You can set up and fill a single raised bed, and if you later change your mind about where and what, you can make changes.

If you like what you experience, you can even put in a second bed close by — or several more — or switch to a different kind or size. Scale up as you want, when you become ready (Chapters 5 and 7 get you there).

Considering the benefits

Having the bed with sides only, and no bottom, also means less to buy and build and less weight. A raised bed both defines and contains the soil mix and the plants. Many people have found that a simple frame makes for a truly manageable gardening project.

Elevating allows you to fill the box with quality soil, even customized to certain plants if you so desire. A variety of good things happen with this bottomless box of good soil mix:

- » Plants get to grow in a quality, controlled environment.
- » Drainage tends to be excellent, which many plants relish.
- » Starting up every spring is less work.
- » The mix warms up nicely, a condition that many plants enjoy, inspiring them to grow earlier and faster.

- » Weeds and pests are less of a problem, so plants grow more freely and are healthier.
- » If your gardening efforts have been stymied by poor or soggy soil, those worries are gone.
- » If your gardening efforts have been stymied by digging critters like gophers, simply cover the bottom of the bed with *hardware cloth*, durable metal mesh that blocks the pests but allows water to drain out. Find out how to do this in Chapter 6.

Raised beds also make gardening more accessible. Does gardening hurt or strain your back? Do you have limited mobility? Make a raised bed as tall as 2 or 3 feet (or more) and you can reach right in to plant, tend, and harvest — far less bending. Raised beds are great for people who use walkers or wheelchairs.

They also make it possible to grow more in less space. Thanks to your ability to create posh growing conditions, including keeping weeds at bay (what are they going to do, climb up and over?), you may space plants more closely and they'll still thrive.

And last but not least, a raised bed's boundaries give a nice tidy look to the whole project. A lot of gardeners, particularly those with limited space and time, really appreciate how a raised bed is, well, defined. Finite. The edge is the edge! Within its four walls, it's simple and, truly, so satisfying to raise good, happy, pretty, productive plants. Garden in a box — you'll love it!

Getting Started

Take a little time at the outset to consider how best to proceed. The following sections discuss the idea of location, location, location and also the general look.

Choosing a good spot

In almost any home landscape, from an urban apartment to a suburban yard to a large property out on the rural route, you can identify an optimum spot — optimum for you and your household, but also suitable for the plants.

To determine a spot that gets maximum sunlight, take the time to observe — realizing that light changes somewhat with the seasons and most likely most of summer is your priority. After all, you may be surprised. Do avoid open, wind-gusty spots and low ground where water pools after a rain. See Chapter 5 for details.

Looking carefully and pinpointing wisely sets the project up for success. And how cool, when you realize what you're really doing is taking a location that previously was unused, unusable, or underused and turning it into a thriving garden!

Coping with site challenges

A perfectly perfect location may be elusive. Priority goes to max sunlight, sure, but what about if the spot isn't level or is occupied with something else?

No worries — you can adapt. Chapter 5 has good advice on how to properly clear out a site and set up a raised bed securely.

Making Bed Decisions

You have options. Looking at materials and colors and styles is the fun part. Bear in mind how much gardening space you can manage to fit in and care for. You can allow for possible future expansion, rather than biting off a huge project at the outset. Here I examine the different types/materials, as well as dimensions (length, width, height).

Contemplating types of raised beds

You have a lot to choose from when selecting what material to use when building a raised bed. Here's an overview of your choices. (Chapter 3 takes a deeper dive.)

Wood

Classic wooden boxes are popular, affordable (depending on the type of wood you select), and practical. Many gardeners appreciate their rustic look. True, wood will rot over time, but you can invest in types that are significantly more durable (such as cedar and redwood) and/or buy time by coating the lumber with a food-safe preservative.



WARNING

Pressure-treated lumber, popular for decks and other outdoor, exposed-to-weather items, isn't recommended for raised beds. The chemical treatment may leach into a raised-bed soil mix, which isn't good for the plants and may make them unsafe for consumption. Same goes for using exterior paint on the boards — I wouldn't.

At any rate, you can buy a kit, you can pay someone to make your wooden raised bed(s) to your specs, or you can make one yourself. As carpentry projects go, making one yourself is pretty simple (Chapter 4 walks you through construction from shopping and tools to assembly). You can even make one out of upcycled materials.

Metal

In recent years, metal raised beds have burgeoned in popularity. They're a cinch to put together and come in a range of sizes and appealing colors. Although they're not cheap, they never rot. Even their color is quite slow to fade, due to powder-coating technology. Whether you favor bright hues (yellow, orange, teal) or something more understated (sage green), these are undeniably appealing and attractive.

Fabric

Fashioned from the same tough material used for other outdoor products from sails to lawn furniture, fabric raised beds are actually quite durable, and many plants adore life in them. May be worth considering!

Miscellaneous options

Some people have created good raised beds out of cinder blocks, stacked rocks or bricks, and other materials. Nothing wrong with these materials if you have access, can afford, don't mind hauling them to the chosen site, and like the look.

Thinking about size and shape

Some raised beds are long and thin, others are square boxes, and you might even entertain other geometric shapes from stars to circles. (Chapter 2 weighs the pros and cons of each.)

But common to most all is width: The consensus is 4 feet wide, which has been time-tested and has many fans. The reason is accessibility. Any wider than that, and reaching into plant, care for, and harvest your plants is difficult. You can certainly go skinnier — which limits the number of plants you can fit, though the narrowness may be dictated by your chosen site or you may simply like the look.

Looking at bed height

The height, or depth, of a raised bed can vary, but no matter what you go with, make sure the bed is able to accommodate the root systems of your plants. Wooden beds 8 to 12 inches high are typical and work just fine for most popular plant choices.

But what if you want to do less bending and stooping, and therefore want a taller bed? You can invest in knee- and waist-high metal raised beds. These types make planting and tending a breeze for many people, including those who use a walker or wheelchair. Or you can build a wooden one up, accomplished by stacking boards to the desired height and reinforcing them for stability. You can find a closer look at all in Chapter 4.

Setting Up Your Raised Beds

When you're ready to roll up your sleeves and install one or more raised beds, some best practices will save you work and aggravation later. These include the following considerations.

Preparing the site

You never want to just plunk a raised bed down without any work on the site first. That's true even if the existing soil there is awful. You don't want a bumpy site or to spare any weeds or grass. Bare ground is best.

A brief overview of the action items, in order, follows (refer to fuller details in Chapter 5):

- » Removing existing vegetation
- » Removing rocks, clods, roots, and any other obstructions
- » Leveling work

Then you can bring the bed forth to see how it sits, and adjust, usually by shoring up the dirt here and there.

Lining the bottom

Lining the base of your bottomless box is almost always wise. Remember, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. (The exception: deeper beds for raising plants with substantial root systems, such as dwarf fruit trees — those roots should be unobstructed. Consult Chapter 13 if this interests you.)



REMEMBER

Allowing water to drain through remains important, but you also don't want nice soil mix to rinse away. Also you don't want weeds or lawn grass to sneak in. Therefore put something on the ground's surface where the bed will go, or, if the bed has been set down, to line its bottom — either way. You can go past the edges for good measure.

Here are your choices, in order of *intensity* (the magnitude of perceived threats):

- » **Cardboard or paper:** Flattened, nonglossy plain cardboard is great, as is craft paper or newspaper.
- » **Weed-blocking fabric:** This heavy-duty material comes in rolls and can be cut to size. It lets water through but blocks interloping weeds or lawn grass.
- » **Wire mesh:** Message to the gophers, moles, and shrews: You shall not pass! Be sure to use small-mesh ($\frac{1}{4}$ inch) and longer-lasting galvanized "hardware cloth."

Making paths

Skip this if you plan only a single bed, but if you're putting in two or four or more beds, good wide paths between aren't only helpful and practical, but they also can be good-looking.

To alleviate the headache of weeds and maintenance, line the area with cardboard or weed-block fabric. Actually, for a substantial raised-bed area, don't do this piecemeal; prep the entire area, as I describe in Chapter 7. (Don't lay down plastic, which blocks the passage of water and oxygen and disintegrates over time, leaving a hard-to-clean-up mess.)

Paths can then be filled in with one or more of these materials: bark mulch, straw, rocks (stones, pebbles), crushed shells, pavers, rubber mats, or turf grass. Each type comes with pros and cons, and sometimes climate will dictate your options (for example, if you live in a windy spot, straw's a poor choice).

Putting in and maintaining soil mix

Only the good stuff! The majority of plants people like to grow in raised beds, including vegetables, do great with a well-drained, fertile mix. You can buy topsoil, compost, dehydrated cow manure, and various other good ingredients by the bag or truckload.

You can make and use your own compost, and/or try recipes recommended to you by seasoned gardeners. The important thing is to include plenty of organic matter. The next-most important thing is to keep after it because the mix will settle and your plants will consume its nutrients. Replenish and top off regularly. Chapter 8 includes some solid advice.



TIP

For deeper/taller beds only, save money and start down the road of self-sufficient, organically enriched soil by using hügelkultur. The short version is that you place branches, trimmings, and decomposing logs in the bottom of your bed to break down gradually, and ladle the regular soil mix overhead.

Focusing On Planting Techniques and Choices

When at last your raised bed is ready to receive plants, you may have questions, particularly if you're a novice gardener. Chapter 9 goes over all the moving-in matters, including:

- » **Choosing seeds or plants:** Some things are easy to start from seed indoors, whereas others aren't and you're better off purchasing seedlings. Some plants can be sown directly into your raised bed as soon as spring is in full swing, and pop up quickly — for example, little radishes and beautiful nasturtiums. You can find out what you're willing and able to do by trial-and-error.
- » **Knowing how to plant:** Best practices include waiting until the soil mix has warmed up, handling baby plants gently, and understanding some thinning will be needed after a spell.
- » **Grouping by similar needs:** Gardening this way is even easier when plants who share similar requirements for water or sun or certain soil nutrients are grouped or share a bed.
- » **Gardening by the square foot:** Justly popular, this tried-and-true technique maximizes yields in small spaces and works well in raised beds.

The following sections focus on deciding what to grow in your raised bed, and how much.

Figuring out what to plant

Choices, choices. Part 3 tours them all, from vegetable crops, to flowers (including bulbs), to herbs, to fruits. All sorts of plants flourish in raised beds, and your challenge may be settling on a few that fit.

It helps to remember that there's always next year, or, installing additional beds!

Narrowing it down

In general, you want to choose plants and varieties that do well where you live. Smart variety choices can help you avoid pests and diseases known to be a problem in your area (that is, seek out resistant varieties). Also, owing to the compact size of a raised bed, seek out smaller types. Bigger and rambling plants can still thrive but will need support and perhaps some pruning or pinching to help keep them in bounds.

Some raised-bed gardeners like to mix it up and enjoy a variety of plants. Others give strawberries, rhubarb, or potatoes their very own bed, or devote a full bed to salad greens.

Keeping busy beds

I predict you'll want to keep them going, with little or no down time during the growing season. Here's a quick overview (refer to Chapter 18):

- » **Savvy choices:** The more you know, the more you can grow! Certain varieties of certain plants are highly productive or give a "cut-and-come-again" harvest.
- » **Succession planting:** When you harvest some plants but want more coming on, this technique makes it so. Basically every week or two, depending on what you're growing and how well the plants are doing, you add more. You fill vacancies and keep younger plants on deck. This way you get a continuous, manageable harvest.
- » **Crop rotation:** Basically you group plants in the same family together. They consume the soil nutrients they favor and possibly attract pests or diseases you don't want to establish (flip to Chapter 16 for preventative strategies and remedies). So the next season, you change it up, moving them to a different location or different bed and slotting in something completely different. Works great! (Full disclosure: four beds or more is best.)

Maintaining Raised Beds

For best results — healthy, attractive, productive plants — you have to take good care of them, and of the bed itself. This isn't difficult; Chapters 15 and 19 go into fuller detail.

Watering

The soil mix in raised beds tends to dry out faster than soil in a raised-bed garden (just as with potted plants). Therefore, you have to be on the case. Stop by and check on your plants often and deliver water consistently.

To make watering easier, install an irrigation system (some come in grids that help facilitate square-foot gardening (check Chapter 9) or at least a leaky hose.

Fertilizing

A raised bed filled with organically rich soil is ideal, but over time two things happen:

- » It settles somewhat.
- » The plants consume its riches.

Therefore, feeding boosts plant growth and productivity. There are organic and inorganic options, including slow-release fertilizers. Chapter 15 helps you get a handle on this.

Mulching

Maintaining a 1-to 2-inch layer of nice organic mulch is an excellent idea in a raised bed for these reasons:

- » It suppresses any weeds that might try to sneak in.
- » It helps conserve soil moisture and mitigates soil-temperature fluctuations.
- » It contributes some texture and nutrition to the soil mix as it gradually decomposes in place.

Do it! You'll end up saving yourself greater effort and time, and your plants will thank you. Chapter 15 has more details and tips.

Preventing pests and diseases

As with humans and other creatures, healthy habits and good nutrition make for a healthier and more resilient raised-bed garden. Should problems develop and pests appear, consult Chapter 16 for help.

Harvesting

Plucking veggies and snipping herbs and picking flowers are among my favorite gardening chores. In a raised-bed garden, you'll be doing these things often. Take care not to disturb neighboring plants, obviously. Other tips, including some that boost productivity, and recommended tools, are in Chapter 17.

Caring for the beds themselves

Wooden beds do eventually break down, but there are good ways to get maximum mileage out of them. Even metal beds appreciate some regular care. Fabric ones, while surprisingly tough, also benefit from routine maintenance. Minor repairs may also be needed at times. None of this is tricky, but none should be neglected, either. Discover the basic practices in Chapter 19.

