

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. By using raised beds, the space between rows that would usually be used for foot paths can be planted with more crops.

Why Garden in Raised Beds?

- You can grow more food in less space using raised beds.
- Plants grow better in raised beds because their roots have more room to spread out and they don't get trampled. The loose soil allows the roots to get the air they need to grow well.
- Digging is easier in raised bed gardens because the soil does not get walked on and compacted.
- Growing seasons are longer using raised beds because they drain better and warm up more quickly. Crops will grow better in late fall, early spring and through the winter.

How Do You Create a Raised Bed?

When you are ready to create a raised bed garden, outline the paths and bed areas with string and stakes. Work only the areas that are to be planted with a shovel or fork. Paths are left undug. The difference between the loosened soil in the beds and the compacted foot paths makes the bed "raised." A wood or other type of frame around the bed is optional, although a frame helps keep the soil within the bed when it is watered.

Add organic material, such as compost, composted manure (use manure only from herbivores), or aged (not fresh) sawdust to the beds. This raises the beds even more and incorporates more air into the soil, which improves drainage and facilitates heating of the soil. See **Fact Sheet #12 Compost**.

On poorly drained sites with very clayey soils, raised beds can be made into planters with sides 6 to 12 inches high. These boxes are then filled with compost or other good soil (not fill soil). Always mix a few inches of your planter soil into the top few inches of the native soil before completely filling up the beds. This improves drainage and helps plant roots reach more nutrients.

Raised beds can be dug with a fork or shovel. An optional way of making even more productive raised beds is by double digging. Double digging involves removing the top 10 to 12 inches of soil so that the next 10 or so inches can be loosened. This helps to further improve drainage, nutrient availability, and plant growth.

Double Digging

- Dig a trench approximately one foot deep, one foot wide, and 3 to 4 feet long. Put the soil you remove from the trench aside to use as fill for your last trench.
- Use a fork or spade to loosen the soil at the bottom of the trench. Try to loosen it another 10 to 12 inches down.
- Now, dig another trench alongside the first, using the soil you remove to fill in the first trench. Again, loosen the bottom 10 to 12 inches of the soil in this second trench.
- Continue digging trenches, loosening their bottom soil and refilling them all along the bed. When you get to the last trench, fill it in with the soil you removed from the first trench.