



Building raised beds can be more expensive than cultivating a ground-level garden, but the benefits are plentiful. ADOBE STOCK PHOTO BY EPIXPRODUCTIONS

Poor Soil? Build Up With Raised Beds

It's a lucky gardener who digs into great soil right off the bat. Most often, it takes years of adding organic material to bring it up to snuff.

There is a shortcut, however. For areas of the garden where you need the best soil, filling a raised bed is a quick solution.

"Raised beds are great, especially where gardeners deal with mud and rain," says Brooke Edmunds, a horticulturist with Oregon State University Extension Service. "In urban areas, we typically have soils of poor quality. Raised beds allow you to build up and get a good root system despite that."

How you build a raised bed depends on personal preference and resources. Making an unframed bed is the easiest and cheapest way to go. Because there is no enclosure, you will work harder to keep it in place. Additional soil and organic matter will need to be added more often since

erosion washes it away. Unframed beds also take up more space because of the slope. Space can be at a premium in urban gardens.

Start a mounded bed with a pass or two of a rototiller to 2 to 3 inches deep or more. If you prefer, use a spade to turn the soil. Add a 2- to 3-inch layer of compost. Dig or till that in. Shape the beds, leaving sufficient pathways.

Building a contained raised bed can be more expensive, depending on the materials chosen, but could be worth the extra cost because you won't have to add soil as often.

Wood is used most commonly. Avoid treated wood, such as old pressure-treated lumber or railroad ties, because they may leach chemicals into the soil. Cedar and redwood cost more, but last longer than other woods.

Concrete bricks, thick edging pavers or



A raised bed isn't always made from wood. Get creative! ADOBE STOCK PHOTO BY JASON

retaining wall blocks are also options. Even rocks will work if you're adept at stacking them.

When designing a bed, keep the width at about 4 feet so you can easily reach into the middle. Stepping into the bed will compact the soil and reduce drainage capacity. Plus, it's a hassle.

For children, build an even narrower bed. If someone in a wheelchair will use it, have the sides the appropriate height to accommodate them. Other than that, shape the beds to fit the space, again being sure to leave adequate space for paths.

Whether you mound a bed or frame it, Brooke recommends buying fresh soil mix either bagged from a garden center or in bulk from a landscape company. Avoid topsoil, which typically doesn't drain well and isn't rich in organic matter. If buying in bulk, try to look in person. The soil should be loose and fresh-smelling, and shouldn't contain rocks or have hard clods.

"The most important thing people should know is to buy good soil," Brooke says. "You need good drainage and high organic matter, especially when growing edibles." ■

Look for the extension's free publication "Raised Bed Gardening," which includes detailed instructions, at <https://catalog.extension.oregonstate.edu/fs270>.



Kym Pokorny

is a communications specialist for Oregon State University's Extension Service. Previously, Kym worked for The Oregonian, most notably covering gardening and horticulture.