



Raised beds: elevate your gardening

By installing raised beds in your garden, you can get growing even where there's no soil – and ease the physical effort of gardening. Here's how...

Raised beds traditionally refer to containers set directly on the ground, rather than a large planter with legs. Introducing raised beds in your garden is an easier way to improve growing conditions than by laboriously digging in conditioner and nutrients. This is particularly the case if you have less-than-optimal soil quality – perhaps because it's old and nutrient-depleted or full of builder's rubble. And even on no soil at all, you'll still be able to grow things.

Benefits for your garden

Plants in a raised bed are likely to be better nourished because the bed will be filled with good-quality compost rather than whatever earth happens to be in the garden. There's also more room for roots, and the soil will be warmer, which enables a longer growing season.

Because the plants are closer to eye level, it'll be easier to spot potential problems such as weeds, drying out

or disease. You can also more easily enjoy smaller flowers that might be virtually invisible at ground level.

And given that it's not at ground level, you're very unlikely to stand on the soil in a raised bed and compact it, which improves drainage.

Look and location

You can locate your raised beds in a side return, on patios, balconies and doorsteps, on the lawn or on top of existing flower beds. They can also tuck into awkward spaces and are perfect for corners.

You can build or buy dual-purpose designs with seating. As well as offering a place to relax, that built-in bench is a useful surface when you're planting, weeding or harvesting.

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What comes to mind when you think of a raised bed? Probably a wooden construction. But you can also build or buy beds made of brick, stone, rendered breeze blocks, steel and woven willow hurdles.

Your task is to find a material to suit your garden, be it a streamlined, contemporary space or a traditional cottage-garden look. Coloured finishes can liven up a dull area or co-ordinate with an existing colour scheme.

And squares and rectangles aren't the only shapes to consider; think triangles, hexagons, ovals or circles, and mix and match heights.

As with other forms of hard landscaping, you can use raised beds to define areas such as seating and dining zones, or to screen the less attractive elements, such as the dustbins or a garage.

For the best results, you need full sun, which means six hours of sunlight a day. If you want to site the beds on a hard surface, you'll need to



add drainage holes in the sides of the bed, because water won't be able to drain from the base.

As the soil may dry out more quickly than in an in-ground bed, it makes sense to have a water supply nearby, preferably a hose from a tap or water butt. And if you want to grow edible crops, locating the raised bed near the house will be most convenient, if that's possible – so you can nip out, even when it's raining, to harvest fresh veg, snip herbs or pick a few berries for breakfast.

What size

Height-wise, the minimum is around 15cm (6 inches) high – the width of a scaffolding board – to allow roots to grow above the natural ground level.

A soil depth of 30cm will suit most veg. However, the taller the bed, the less bending you'll have to do, so consider higher beds to suit. This will also help to futureproof your garden, so that you can continue to enjoy it despite any mobility limitations that may creep up with age.

Keep the width to no more than 1.2 metres, so that you can comfortably

reach across to access the plants. If you're building more than one raised bed, leave enough room between them to push a wheelbarrow or to sit or kneel for weeding.

Adding vertical supports extends the growing area, and some commercial beds incorporate lengths of trellis in their design. You can, of course, add your own.

Before planting, add a liner to the inside of the beds, but not to the base, and fill with a suitable mix of peat-free compost. For most plants, that would be three parts compost or organic matter (such as well-rotted manure or leaf mould) to two parts sharp sand and seven parts topsoil.

What you can grow

Raised beds aren't just for vegetables, although they are ideal for creating a separate 'kitchen garden' area. You can grow whatever you like, from

edible crops to small trees. That includes plants that need different soil conditions to the rest of your plot – such as acidic, or ericaceous, soil for rhododendrons and azaleas, a gritty, free-draining mix for alpine and/or succulents.

If you already grow your own fruit and vegetables, consider filling a bed with your favourites.

If you're just starting out, May is a good time to sow herb seeds such as basil, chives and parsley, as well as tomatoes, courgettes and beans.

Tuck in some strawberries, too, and don't forget super-simple salad leaves, staggering the sowing over a few weeks so that you have a constant supply. If you're keen to achieve instant results, you can stock up on ready-grown plants instead.

Some specimens are not good for raised beds, including those with large root systems that spread vigorously – the likes of pumpkins, mint, blackberries and sweetcorn.

But with some careful planning, you can have a welcome new source of colour and culinary support in your garden, all within easy reach. 🍃

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How to plant up a hanging basket

Create a showpiece for a cheery welcome on either side of your front door, or to brighten up a patio or narrow side return.

As well as bringing colour and life to walls, you can suspend hanging baskets from trees, railings, pergolas or shed roofs. Use right-angled brackets for walls, and rope or chain and an S-hook for branches. And do make sure your support is strong enough – a well-watered basket is heavy.

Plan your suspended show for after the last frost, generally the end of May. A hemispherical wire design is the classic approach, but you can find conical and pyramidal options in materials including ceramic, metal, woven water hyacinth and rattan. And you can suspend any container that has drainage holes – how about a colander or a wicker-handled basket?

Filling the basket

Support the basket on a wide pot or bucket. Put a plant saucer, or a circle of plastic, in the base as a reservoir. Add a liner, usually made from moisture-retaining, breathable natural fibres like jute, coir or coconut fibre. You can also use moss from your garden, green side out, or sphagnum moss from garden centres and online.

For a rounded, lush appearance, make holes through the liner, at least

10cm from the base. Add peat-free compost up to this level. Wrap the plants' rootballs in newspaper and push through the holes. Cover the roots with compost and firm lightly.

Now add the remaining plants from the top, working outwards. Then add compost to just below the top, and water with a watering can or hose with a fine spray.

Keep in mind the tried-and-tested 'thriller, filler and spiller' combination: colourful, showy plants at centre stage; bushy, frothy or spreading options to fill gaps; and trailing plants to add volume and depth. Go for old favourites such as petunias and fuchsias, or a fresh look: blooms of all one colour, say, or just one plant. Don't forget scented

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specimens that are nearer nose level. And you don't need to stick to summer bedding. Flavourful herbs, juicy strawberries and tumbling tomatoes are less vulnerable to slugs and other hungry wildlife.

Drought-tolerant plants such as geraniums, nigella (love-in-a-mist), nasturtiums and nemesia mean you'll need to water less often.

Looking after your basket

Sun and wind will dry it out, so you'll need to water regularly, possibly even twice a day in very hot weather. Check whether it's dry by sticking your finger into the soil.

You can also lift the basket slightly – if it feels light, it needs water. Use a hose or watering can with a fine spray, to ensure thorough soaking and to avoid washing away the soil. Some water will inevitably run out.

And to keep it looking beautiful, use liquid or dry, slow-release feed, and deadhead regularly. ☺

