

HOW TO GET A RAISE

A super-simple setup for people who think they can't garden

BY ZOE SCHAEFFER

There are a whole lot of reasons to build raised garden beds—the kind that sit above ground within a frame made of wood or other material. If your land has sandy, claylike, or hard-packed soil (or if you don't know and don't give a hoot about the difference), you can provide perfect conditions for whatever you're keen on

EMELY/IMAGE SOURCE/OFFSET

growing. Plants are lifted out of the way of rowdy pets and little ones, and your soil warms up earlier and stays that way longer, extending the growing season and providing gentler conditions for new seeds and delicate transplants. Fruits, veggies, and ornamentals will send their roots deeper in search of water, which means a stronger foundation and improved health. And raised beds keep your space tidy. Best of all, they couldn't be easier to make. Especially if you're getting into growing for the first time, you're going to want some beds of your own.

SPACE

Build your beds somewhere that receives at least 5 to 6 hours of daily sunlight (the more, the better!). Orient them north to south to prevent plants from shading each other out. Beds should be at least a foot wide, though no more than 4 feet across to make weeding and harvesting manageable. Six to 8 feet long is typical and cost-effective. Ten to 14 inches is an ideal height to accommodate strong roots. Leave at least 2 or 3 feet between beds for walking and wheelbarrow access.

ALTERNATIVES

The possibilities for building materials are endless. For instructions on how to build a bed out of wattle, logs, or concrete blocks, visit RodalesOrganicLife.com/raisedbeds.



WATTLE
Weave a frame with long, flexible sticks. The kids will have fun collecting them, and the results are usually Pinterest-worthy.



LOGS
If you've recently cleared a tree, logs can be a cost-effective material. Choose pieces that are straight and at least 1 foot in diameter.



CONCRETE BLOCKS
Placing the blocks with open ends up provides extra growing room. Tuck herbs or decorative flowers into the cavities.



HIGH AND MIGHTY
A waist-high bed is accessible to those with physical limitations. Find instructions at RodalesOrganicLife.com/highandmighty.

WOOD

Pressure-treated lumber and railroad ties contain chemicals like arsenic and creosote that can leach into your soil. Instead, use untreated wood. It isn't as durable, but the brilliance of a plank-and-rebar design (see facing page) is that each individual wall is easily replaced. Try naturally rot-resistant varieties of wood, such as oak, cedar, and redwood.

SOIL

You want the kind that's dark, rich, and loaded with microorganisms. Fill your beds with a mix of 50 to 60 percent good-quality topsoil and 40 to 50 percent well-aged compost. Before each new growing season, test your soil for pH and nutrient content. You can buy a kit at most home-improvement stores. If your test shows a need for additional nutrients like nitrogen and potassium, raise levels by working in amendments such as bone meal and kelp. Dress beds with an additional ½ inch of compost later in the growing season to increase organic matter and boost soil health.

PLANTS

If you're building your beds in high summer, it's not too late to plant fall crops. Sow seeds like carrots and lettuce directly into the soil, or buy midseason transplants for crops like kale and broccoli. If you'd rather wait until next year to plant, cover the soil in your new raised beds with a mixture of grass clippings and shredded leaves in autumn—the material will compost before you're ready to start in spring.

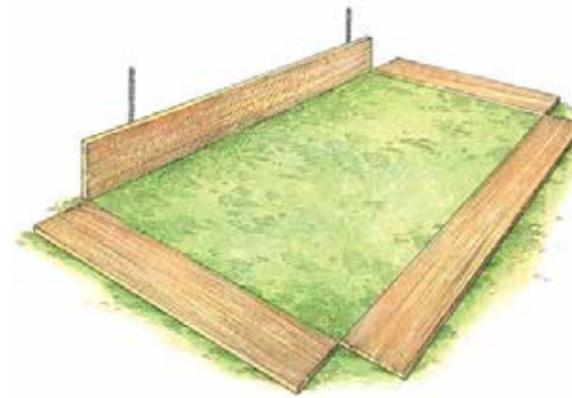
WATER

Raised beds have fantastic drainage, which is great for plant health, but they dry out quickly. Give your plants a long drink in the early evening, but check them again on hot summer afternoons. If the soil is dry, it's a real scorcher outside, or you live in a hot and arid climate, water again. A programmable drip-irrigation system (try a starter kit from dripworks.com) is inexpensive and convenient, delivering consistent moisture straight to plant roots. Invest in a timer component to save money and water.

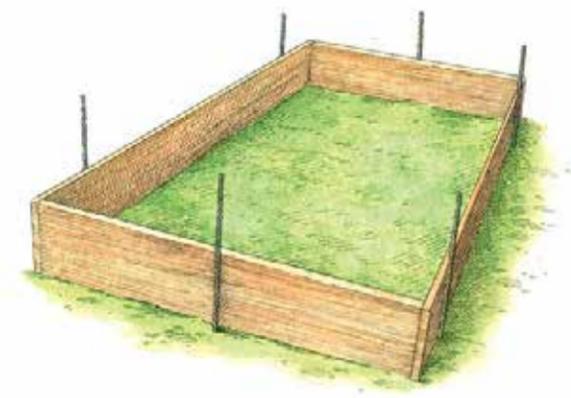
THE BUILDUP

FOR A 4-BY-8-FOOT BED, YOU'LL NEED:

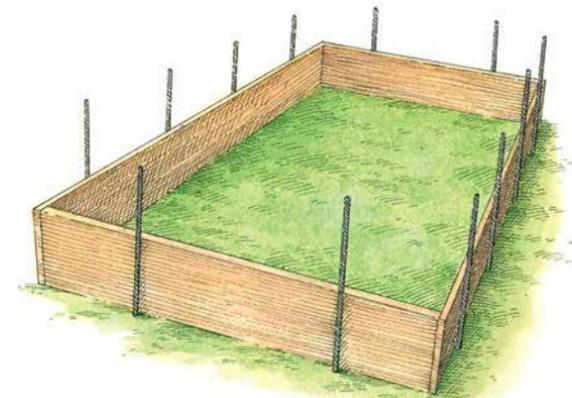
- Two 2-by-12 planks, each 8 feet long
- Two 2-by-12 planks, each 4 feet long
- 12 pieces of rebar, each 2 feet long
- A rubber mallet
- Newspaper or cardboard
- Soil to fill the finished frame



1. On a level section of ground, lay the boards down with their inner corners touching. Stand one long board on its side, and, using a rubber mallet, hammer two pieces of rebar 1 foot from each corner, a few inches deep into the ground.



2. Prop up the short sides using a piece of rebar at each center for temporary support. Next, prop up the second long side and adjust the alignment of your frame as necessary. Then hammer rebar a few inches deep 1 foot from each corner of the second long side.



3. Hammer rebar a few inches deep a foot from each corner of the short sides and remove the temporary supports. Add two pieces of rebar 2 feet apart along each long side. These will reinforce the frame when it's filled with soil.



4. Hammer in the rebar until 6 to 10 inches are exposed above ground. Line the bottom of your frame with newspaper or cardboard and wet it thoroughly. Finally, fill your bed with soil to within a few inches of the top.