

Raised beds can make gardening easier

By Melinda Myers

Don't let a sore back, bad knees or lousy soil stop you from gardening. Elevate your garden for easier access and better gardening results.

The simple act of creating a raised bed improves drainage in heavy clay soil. Add in some organic matter to further increase drainage and improve the water holding ability for sandy soils.

And if your soil is beyond repair or you don't want to wait, a raised garden allows you to bring in quality soil and create a garden right on top of the existing soil or even paved areas.

The quality soil and easy access will allow for dense plantings without pathways. This means greater yields, up to four times more, in raised beds than in-ground gardens.

Raised beds also help conserve water. You'll concentrate your growing efforts in smaller areas and that means less water wasted. Increase the benefit by using soaker hoses or drip irrigation in order to concentrate water application to the soil nearest the plants, right where it is needed.

Make your raised bed a comfortable height. Elevating the garden minimizes bending and kneeling. Design raised beds in corners or edges suited for sitting or areas narrow enough to set a garden bench alongside for easy access.

Design raised gardens so they are narrow enough for gardeners to easily reach all plants growing within the garden. Or include steppers or pathways if creating larger raised garden areas.

Add a mowing strip around the edge of the raised bed. A narrow strip of mulch or pavers set level with the soil surface keep the area tidy and eliminate the need for hand trimming.

Select a material suited to your landscape design. Wood, brick and stones have long been used to create raised beds. Consider using materials that are long-lasting and easy to assemble, like a paver stone. These stone sections can be set right on the ground, fit together easily, and can be arranged and stacked to make planters the size, shape and height desired.

Start a raised bed garden by measuring and marking the desired size and shape. Remove the existing grass and level the area. For taller raised gardens edge the bed, cut the grass short and cover with newspaper or cardboard prior to filling with soil. Be sure to follow directions for the system being installed.

Once the raised bed is complete, fill it with quality soil. Calculate the volume of soil needed by multiplying the length times the width times the height of the raised bed, making sure all measurements are in feet. Convert the cubic feet measurement to cubic yards by dividing it by 27 (the number of cubic feet in a cubic yard). Don't let the math overwhelm you, most topsoil companies and garden center staff can help you with the calculations. Just be sure to have the raised bed dimensions handy when you order your soil.

The best part is that this one time investment of time and effort will pay off with years of gardening success.

Melinda Myers is a gardening expert, TV/radio host, author and columnist whoe has more than 30 years of horticulture experience and has written more than 20 gardening books.