

How does your raised garden grow?



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KISH DOYLE OF MASTER GARDENER

Transform old household objects like a bathtub into a raised flower bed.

Structured beds can take your gardening to a whole new level

CAROL DALU
Master Gardener

Question: I would like to build a raised vegetable bed. What should I consider before getting started?

Answer: The most basic raised bed uses simple mounded rows of soil, but I gather you are thinking more about a structure since you indicate you plan to build your bed.

The use of a structured raised bed provides a gardener many benefits — no need to suffer with poor native soil conditions (i.e., too wet, too rocky, too sandy), flexibility of garden placement for optimal sun exposure, ease of harvesting for those with back or mobility concerns, better drainage, a longer growing season as the soil warms earlier in the spring and stays warmer in the fall, higher yields in less space than conventional rows, and it's easier to control weeds and pests.

Using beds is an easy method for growing both edibles and ornamentals, yet there are a few key elements to consider before getting started:

Location — Think about what you would like to grow, and the necessary sun exposure. Is the location close to a water source, and can you connect to an irrigation system or, if watering by hand, will you need to haul a hose a great distance?

If you will need wheelbarrow access, allow for enough space around the bed. If deer or other critters are an issue, can you easily protect the bed, and would you like it located near the kitchen for ease of access to edibles?

Soil — Depending on the depth of the bed, and the quality of your native soil, you may need to dig or rototill the native soil down to a depth of 6 inches. Once the bed is in place, fill halfway with loam (a good planting soil consisting of a crumbly mixture of clay, silt and sand), and mix in an equal amount of organic matter (i.e., compost, leaf mulch, animal manure).

A three-tined garden fork makes mixing easier. Depending on the size of your bed, you may need a significant amount of soil (having it delivered

may be more economical than purchasing it by the bag), and look for good quality soil that is fresh smelling and free of rocks or hard clods.

After the first season, add on a layer of 2 to 4 inches of compost in October; then, in the following March/April, mix into the soil.

Size — Typically, raised beds are at least 6 to 12 inches deep, depending on the quality of the native soil, and what you plan to grow and how deep their root systems grow. The ideal width is no more than 4 feet. This allows you to be able to reach into the middle from either side.

The length of the bed can be as long as space allows. The taller the bed, the easier it is to harvest from, and adding a wide upper edge can provide a place to sit. Incorporating a cover (i.e., a cloche) can provide the opportunity to grow cool weather crops in the winter.

Now that the location is set, the soil is ready and the size determined, we can get creative with the design so that the bed fits within our landscape. The choices are really unlimited, but a few options to consider:

■ Straw bales, such as wheat or barley (hay is not recommended, as it may contain weeds or seeds), work well for growing carrots and potatoes, or for peas and pole beans if a trellis is added. Dig a hole in the straw for each plant and fill with soil; as the straw composts, it feeds the plants.

■ Raw wood, such as cedar or redwood planks; both are fairly resilient to moisture.

■ Treated wood lasts longer in wet conditions. To reduce the risk of the preservatives potentially contaminating the soil, cover the wood with plastic sheeting.

■ Old tires can be stacked on top of each other and used for deep rooted plants or potatoes.

■ Concrete or bricks — such as edging pavers, decorative landscape or cinder blocks — last a long time, absorb heat well and are water resistant. Stack them one, two or three blocks high.

■ Galvanized water troughs



An overview of many different types of raised beds made from wood, above. Raised beds with legs, left, make gardening easier for those with back problems. A long raised bed with an upright trellis system, below, can train vining vegetables to grow vertically.



are sturdy and last a long time; don't forget to drill drain holes in the bottom.

Now that the bed is designed, and the basic elements are nailed down, it's time to prepare for planting. March through April is a great time to prepare the bed; once soil

temperature is consistently above 60 degrees Fahrenheit, warm season vegetables can be planted. Soon, you will be enjoying your own homegrown edibles — happy gardening!

Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call

or visit the Douglas County Master Gardeners Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-236-3052 or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.