



ALABAMA COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM/ LIMESTONE COUNTY OFFICE

The Garden Spot For week of May 11, 2009

Raised Garden Beds are Popular

While home vegetable gardens are making a comeback, many people simply don't have the space or time for gardening. The best solution then might be to grow vegetables in raised beds.

Raised bed gardening is a convenient and easy way to produce home grown vegetables. Unlike traditional gardening, raised bed gardening is a perfect alternative for people that need options due to limited garden space, poor or rocky soil, inadequate soil drainage, or physical limitations.

The idea of raised bed gardening is nothing new. Farmers and gardeners have mounded soil up to grow plants for centuries. Raised bed gardening is unique in that the soil level is raised above the surrounding soil, 6 inches to waist high, and enclosed with frame materials to prevent soil from spilling out. The contained soil is formed into 3 – 4 foot wide planting beds.

Raised-bed gardens offer both advantages and disadvantages over conventional garden plots:

Advantages

- Higher soil levels and improved soil quality provides a means for better access, less maintenance, and easier harvest.
- They can be utilized as a solution for areas with poor and rocky soil or sloped terrains.
- Beds are usually filled with high quality soil mixes that have large amounts of organic matter which improves drainage and may increase yields.
- Soil raised above ground level tends to drain better and warms up much quicker in the spring, thus allowing for faster seed germination and transplant growth.

- Dense planting techniques result in higher production per square foot of garden and helps reduce weed seed germination.
- No expensive power cultivation equipment is needed.
- A well-maintained raised bed gardening can be extremely attractive and a prized addition to the home landscape.

Disadvantages

- Elevated beds tend to dry out more quickly in the hot summer months, thus increasing the need for watering.
- Frame and soil materials for establishing a raised bed are an added expense.
- Limited rotation of crops may lead to increased soil-borne diseases and nematode problems.
- Increased plant density may increase some pest concerns.
- They are not well suited to sprawling vegetables such as watermelons and cucumbers.

Raised beds can be made just by mounding the soil. However, most gardeners prefer to use some sort of framing materials. Old railroad ties, landscape timbers, wood planks, rock, concrete blocks, or decorative bricks are commonly used for constructing raised beds. If wood products are used, they should be treated with wood preservative to increase the life of the structure

The size of a raised bed depends on the gardener. Sizes ranging from 4 x 4 foot to 4 x 12 foot are ideal. The 4-foot width is preferred because it allows for an easy reach from either side without having to step into the bed. Length of the bed can also vary depending on type of materials used and the space available for the bed. A soil depth of 6 to 12 inches is desirable as this will allow for improved drainage and adequate root development to produce healthy plants.

There are numerous growing media options available when creating a raised bed. Any combination of purchased topsoil, compost, fine pine bark mulch or soil conditioner, and/or peat will do well for growing vegetables in a raised bed.

For a truly productive raised-bed garden, the gardener must re-learn many aspects of planting. Gone are the long straight rows and wide spacing between rows. It's all a matter of 'thinking small'.

If you have questions on home gardening or related topics, remember that the Limestone County Master Gardeners have a 'HelpLine' on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 9 a.m. until 1 p.m. They are highly trained and willing to help with your home gardening

and home grounds questions. Their phone number is 232-5510 and they are located in an office at the Limestone County Extension Office at 1109 W. Market Street in Athens.



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