

# Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

## FACT SHEET

**Have gardening questions?** Contact the **Master Gardener Help Line.**

Two locations / two ways to contact us:

At *Mass Hort, Wellesley*: [mghelpline@masshort.org](mailto:mghelpline@masshort.org), 617-933-4929

At *Tower Hill Botanic Garden, Boylston*: [hortline@towerhillbg.org](mailto:hortline@towerhillbg.org), 608-869-6111 x104

Please visit our web site for Help Line open hours <http://massmastergardeners.org/what-i-do/>



## Raised Bed Vegetable Gardening

Have problem soil? Want to avoid the need to re-till your vegetable garden each year? Tree roots in the way? Struggle with getting down on your knees? Then try a raised bed.

What are raised beds? “Raised” means that the soil level is several inches – or feet – above the surrounding ground. “Bed” implies the space is small enough to work without stepping on the growing area.

### WHY RAISED BEDS?

- A raised bed vegetable garden can produce over three times the yield of a traditional garden the same size. The absence of paths inside the bed reduces soil compaction, allowing water, air and roots to move easily through the soil. This eliminates the need for annual re-tilling and increases how many plants can be grown close together. Closely-planted vegetables shade the soil, reducing weeds and evaporation due to sunlight and wind.
- Raised bed soil warms up and drains more quickly than the surrounding ground. As a result, raised bed gardeners often can begin planting (and harvesting!) earlier than in-ground gardeners.
- With raised beds you decide the composition of the soil, a definite plus if you want to be certain you are growing vegetables in organic soil.
- Because beds are relatively narrow, you can easily use garden cloth or plastic to make them do double-duty as cold frames, protecting plants from frost and wind.
- Raised beds can be adapted to accommodate landscape and physical challenges. For gardeners who have trouble kneeling, bending or standing, beds can be built as tall as needed.
- Raised beds add architectural interest. They provide a structure and an orderly plan to the garden and can be a beautiful component of any yard.

### RAISED BED HOW-TO'S

- Place your vegetable garden where it will get at least 8 hours of direct sunlight daily.
- A raised bed can simply be soil piled up to the desired height; more commonly, soil is enclosed by a wall of wood, rocks or masonry, including cement blocks.
- Cedar and redwood are durable woods for raised beds but can be expensive. Spruce and fir are easier to find and more affordable. Pressure-treated wood should be avoided.
- A raised bed 3-4 feet wide can be comfortably worked from the sides. (For use by children, make them no more than 3 feet wide.) Bed length should be appropriate to the site and in keeping with the amount of work the gardener is prepared to do. Waist-high beds reduce the need for bending and can be worked in a seated position.
- Spaces between beds may be left as grass, mulched or even paved with stone or brick, as appropriate to the location.
- As a rule, beds should initially be filled with a mixture of good soil and clean organic matter such as compost or aged animal manure. To keep the soil easy to work and highly productive, put down a fresh layer of organic material each fall or early spring. Cover crops can also be used.
- Due to improved soil drainage and the possibility of evaporation through the sides of the enclosure, raised bed moisture levels need to be monitored closely. Soaker hoses and drip irrigation are ideally suited to raised beds, saving time and water.

Many urban areas are using raised beds for their shared community gardens; they are a great source of inspiration for your own yard. Pictures of many kinds of raised beds are available at <http://extension.missouri.edu/p/G6985>. To learn more about vegetable gardening, explore our other fact sheets at <http://massmastergardeners.org/horticultural-information/fact-sheet-test/>.

*The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to share knowledge and experience with the public through outreach programs in education, horticulture and gardening; to provide the Master Gardener Training Program to interested members of the public; and to provide graduates of the Master Gardener Training Program with educational and practical opportunities to extend their knowledge and interests in gardening and related topics.*

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