



Gardening in Raised Beds and Containers

By Gwen Kilchherr, Sonoma County Master Gardener

Raised beds concentrate soil preparation in small areas, help conserve water, warm up more quickly than the ground in spring and stay warmer longer into fall, allowing for more effective and efficient gardening. They can also be an appealing landscape feature. It's an idea that is a winner all around!

Gardening in raised beds makes it easier to create deep, fertile soil that is high in organic matter. It also dramatically increases the yield of the garden because the soil used in the beds can be made ideal for raising plants. Raised beds allow you to completely amend your native soil – often the ideal situation – or to replace as much of it as you wish with any soil mix you'd like. A raised bed garden allows you to overcome the challenges posed by inhospitable soils that are rocky, clay-filled, boggy or too sandy by replacing them with healthy, nutrient-rich soil. You can even use a different type of soil mix in each raised bed, to tailor each to the plant types you plan to grow.

Raised beds can be as long as desired but are ideally 4' wide to allow for maximum planting area and easy access across the entire bed from both sides. The height can be as high or low as is comfortable, although 1' seems to be most popular and allows for good root development. However, those gardeners with special needs can construct their beds to any height necessary to insure comfort during care and harvesting. If you have foraging rabbits, for example, making the beds a bit higher, say 2', will put your tender vegetables out of their reach. If you desire wheelchair access, make sure to leave enough room between beds for easy maneuvering. To insure effective water distribution, the beds should be reasonably level and if you have gophers in your garden, which most of us in the County do, lining the beds with 1/4" hardware cloth is a must.

For those without the space for raised beds, container gardening is a wonderful alternative. Containers provide the same ease and comfort to the gardener as raised beds, but your garden is now much more mobile, allowing you to move

containers throughout the seasons for better sun or shade. And almost any plant can be grown in a container.... even fruit trees....provided the container is a few inches larger all around than the root ball of the plant going into it, and you maintain the plant in future with fertilizer, sufficient irrigation and possible occasional root pruning.

There are a few things to be careful of when gardening in containers. First, make sure there are drainage holes of sufficient size in the container you are using. Even wood is not porous enough to allow the soil to dry out between watering. Drainage allows the soil in the pots to remain aerobic and healthy. Many containers come with one small hole in the middle; avoid problems by drilling more holes to allow the water to flow through and not get backed up in the pot. It is often advisable to put small blocks underneath the container so that it is not sitting directly on the ground or patio, as the lack of space and circulation can prohibit the water from draining from the container.

It is also important that you use soil that is specific for containers. Regular soil is too heavy; it quickly becomes compacted and doesn't allow for enough air in the soil for proper root development. Because potting or container soil is generally rich in nutrients and because plants in pots don't get as large as those in the ground, you can plant your vegetables, fruits and flowering plants closer together.

To insure proper nutrition for your plants and their continued growth, it is necessary every few years to take the plants out of the container, trim an inch or so of roots growing against the side and bottom of the inside of the container and add enough new soil to fill the space created by trimming the roots. If you are growing trees in containers this step is vital, and you may want to move the tree(s) up to a larger container as well as root prune. Soil is gradually washed out of the bottoms of containers, causing the plant to sink. When you repot your plants, you can add soil to raise the plant back to within an inch of the top of the pot, allowing enough space for watering and mulching.

Gardening in raised beds and containers is a way to create the proper gardening conditions in a small area for plants that you would not otherwise be able to grow, or that would otherwise languish. You can even sneak in a few water-hogs like roses and grow them with a fraction of the water that you would need if they were planted in the soil around your garden.