

Raised beds are an attractive addition to a garden and offer practical advantages for all gardeners. However, as with any permanent garden feature, it's worth considering a few key points when deciding whether or not raised beds are for you.



What are the benefits of raised beds?

- If the soil in your garden is poor, raised beds allow you to introduce an area of good quality soil where you can grow flowers and vegetables and get better results.
- Beds at different levels add shape, form and focus to the garden and can make the whole design more interesting. You can even use higher raised beds to partly screen items like compost bins and sheds.
- Raised beds can make gardening easier for people with disabilities. You can choose the height of the bed so that it helps you garden more comfortably standing up or sitting down. Higher beds can also offer support to people who have balance problems.



What are the difficulties with raised beds?

- Raised beds will need more watering than those at ground level.
- Working at a straight sided raised bed might be difficult from a wheelchair or if you sit to garden as you need to lean forward and twist slightly.



- When you have installed raised beds it may be difficult to remove them. Make sure that they are what you need, that they fit into your garden layout, and that the beds are in the right position for the plants you want to grow.
- Although raised beds can be helpful, people's needs vary. You might find that you prefer gardening at ground level using lightweight, long handled tools. Find out what is the most comfortable gardening position for you and then consider all the options before you decide.



What is the recommended height and width for a raised bed?

- It's important to think about what's most comfortable and practical for you when you are gardening. Also, consider where the bed will be positioned and whether you can stand or sit next to one side of the bed, or whether both sides are accessible.
- **Width**
The width of a raised bed, which you can access from both sides, can be up to 1,000mm wide. At this width you should be able to reach all areas of the bed with ease. The length of the bed will then be determined by the space you have available and how big you want the bed to be.

If you can only access the bed from one side, the maximum width is around 500mm.



- **Height**
The height of a raised bed will be determined by what's best for you. Think about whether you garden standing, sitting or kneeling, whether you'd like to sit on the edge of the bed and how it will look in your garden.

This table is a guide to the height and width of raised beds, but check the measurements suit you before deciding.

Your needs:	Height of bed	Maximum width of bed with access one side only
Standing	900–1,000mm	500mm
Sitting	690–760mm	500mm
Wheelchair user	615mm	500mm

Where in your garden should you put a raised bed?

- **Position**

Every garden is different, as are the needs of each gardener, but try and choose a reasonably sunny location for the raised bed, which is open, with some shade and not too close to trees. Also, try and position the raised bed near a garden tap, as it will generally need regular watering. Where the raised bed is located will determine the plants that you can grow successfully.

- **Easy access**

Paths leading to the raised bed should be well-drained and have a firm, non-slip and level surface. Wheelchair users should avoid paths with loose material such as gravel and wood chip.

The minimum recommended width for a path to accommodate one person is around 750mm and 1200mm for two people. A 900mm width is the minimum for a wheelchair but bear in mind the

turning circle needed. This is 1,575mm for a manual wheelchair and 2,420mm for a powered wheelchair.

If you have **balance problems**, you could consider incorporating a handrail into the design of the bed.

Foot holes and knee/leg space can be incorporated into the design for those who prefer to work at the bed facing forwards. You can design the bed with small recesses at ground level for just your feet, or like a table top to accommodate your knees and legs.

These designs will be more complex to construct and therefore more costly, but will be worth it if this type of bed is best for you. Also, you will need to bear in mind the reduced soil depth in a table top style bed. The shallower growing area will restrict your choice of plants and you may have to water more frequently.

What are the options for constructing raised beds and which materials are suitable?

- **Ready-made, DIY or professional contractor**

If DIY is not your thing, there are many companies that sell raised beds. These might be in kit form for you to build at home, or custom made to your exact requirements.

Buying ready-made raised beds will reduce the heavier work needed, but keep the following points in mind:

- o Depending on the raised bed that you choose, there may be a choice of colours so think about how they would look in your garden before you choose. If you are visually impaired, choosing a strong contrasting colour can help you identify where you are in the garden.
- o Look at the range of sizes and dimensions of

the beds on sale and consider what you need.

- o Check whether the bed needs foundations to keep it stable and level.
- o Check the reputation of the supplier and the quality of their customer service.

Whether you choose to build the bed yourself, or employ a professional contractor, will depend on your skill and budget. Beds made using stone or brick might be best left to experts unless you have building experience. Safety is extremely important when building raised beds – the bed must be capable of bearing the weight of the soil, which can be very heavy even in a small raised bed. If in doubt, always consult a professional contractor.

- **Construction materials**

- o **Timber** – is easy to buy and work with and is available in different widths and can be cut to the length required.



- o Using wider timber to build your bed would allow you to incorporate seating, but might limit access to the bed if you can't reach across easily. Narrow timber takes up less space and makes access easier, and the planks can be used vertically or horizontally to alter the 'look' or design.
- o All timber should be sourced from sustainable forests, preferably with FSC certification. Softwoods should be pressure treated at source to ensure they last longer or you can paint, preserve and line untreated timber. Any metal fixings that you use should be made from corrosion resistant materials such as stainless steel, be galvanised or with another specialist coating.

- o **Plastic** – is used in modular ready-made raised beds and has the benefit of lower cost, easier installation and is long lasting.



- o **Stone and brick** – are the most expensive and the most challenging materials with which to build a raised bed. Building these beds might be best left to experts unless you have building experience. Precast units are often made of concrete and reconstituted stone.



- **Soil, compost and drainage**

Plants growing in raised beds have a limited source of moisture and nutrients, so the soil or compost used to fill the bed must be good quality and watered regularly.

You will also need to provide good drainage, so put holes in the base of the bed and several centimetres of clean stone or rubble before the soil or compost is added. The type of soil or compost

used will depend on the plants to be grown. In most cases, a mixture of good garden soil and a quality compost will be suitable for larger beds and soil-less composts for small beds and containers. The soil in the bed will take time to settle and will need topping up – this settlement could take a few years in high raised beds so just plant annuals or vegetables to start with and leave permanent planting for later.

What plants can I grow in a raised bed?

- Think about the time of year that you like to garden and the amount of maintenance that you are happy with.
- Consider the location of your bed and whether it has sun or shade.
- Choose plants that you like and think about a mix of flowers and vegetables for variety. As a general rule, any plants suitable for containers can be grown in raised beds so check the labels before you buy.
- Here are a few small plants suitable for planting in raised beds:
 - o seasonal bedding including climbing annuals if you have trellis
 - o small shrubs including Daphnes and the small Hebes
 - o bulbs such as daffodils, snowdrops, tulips and Dutch Iris
 - o a wide range of vegetables particularly salad crops and herbs such as chives, rosemary, thyme and parsley.
- As a general rule, it is best to avoid plants that spread and are likely to take over the raised bed, such as mint, the creeping grasses and small bamboos.



We hope this information has been of help.

If you are thinking of building a raised bed yourself, or need information to give to a professional contractor, have a look at Thrive's leaflet: **How to build raised beds** – this gives you more detailed information on different designs and methods of construction. This leaflet is available from Thrive on **0118 988 5688**.

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