

## Big ideas for small plants

# Easy Raised Beds

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A raised bed can make an attractive garden feature, adding height to an otherwise flat area. Raised beds can be used to separate different areas; at the edge of a terrace or patio for example, to separate it from the main body of the garden. A wide range of materials can be used to build one, giving an appearance in sympathy with the garden as a whole, whether formal or informal.

### Why used raised beds?

With a raised bed you can:

- Grow alpines, which mostly need good drainage, even when your garden soil is heavy clay with poor drainage.
- Grow lime-hating plants in limestone or chalk areas.
- Raise small plants up to your level. If you have mobility difficulties, you can sit on the edge of a raised bed to admire and tend your plants.



## What materials are best for building?

A wide range of materials can be used to construct the walls of a raised bed. Each has advantages and disadvantages.

Stone can give a very attractive appearance, but is by far the most expensive option (unless you live near a quarry!) Stratified stone is the easiest to work with and looks well. It can be loose-laid in dry stone wall fashion to enhance drainage, and provide additional planting spaces in the walls. Stone offered in rounded lumps is very difficult to use, and the end product rarely looks good.

Many types of building block are widely available at Do-it-Yourself stores, landscaping centers and the like:

Foamed concrete blocks are large (43 x 20 x 10 cm), quick and easy to build with, but have a ghastly white or pale grey colour. The colour can be quickly toned down, however, by watering with dilute manure, or a dilute slurry of compost from the compost heap. A little careful 'bashing' will create a more rugged, stone-like appearance. These also can be laid without mortar if placed on their widest faces. The finished wall is wide enough to sit on.

There is a wide variety of building blocks made of 'reconstituted stone'. The larger sizes can again be laid without mortar, but the smaller ones need to be properly laid, and give a more formal appearance. Paving blocks as used for driveways may blend in well in some positions.

Particularly if the bed is to be placed near a house, matching bricks may be a good choice. New bricks can have a rather stark appearance, but old ones are now often much more expensive.



Old railway sleepers are very quick and easy to lay, but are quite heavy. They give an instant 'aged' informal appearance. Unfortunately, they should not be sat upon, as the wood preservatives they contain may be irritant or toxic.

## How large should a bed be?

A bed may be as long as desired, but it should not be that wide that every part cannot be easily reached for maintenance. For a free-standing bed this means a maximum of 1 – 1.5 metres.

Depth is more flexible. If the bed is needed for growing alpines over a heavy soil, as little as 15 – 20 cm can be sufficient. A layer of coarse gravel in the base will help to drain excess water away. Remember that the deeper the bed, the greater the volume of compost you will need to fill it! When used to grow lime-hating plants in gardens with alkaline soil, a greater depth is needed, at least 30 cm. Before filling the bed, a sheet of heavyweight polythene is laid on the soil surface to retard the penetration of alkalinity. Unless for the purposes of garden design, a depth of more than 45 cm is probably unnecessary.

An open, sunny situation is best. Avoid placing a bed near large trees; the drip from them can be troublesome, and hungry roots may cause problems too. A position which is shady around the middle of the day will suit woodland plants and other shade-lovers.



## Will the walls need a foundation?

For beds up to about 30 cm deep, made with railway sleepers or building blocks of concrete or reconstituted stone, these can be laid directly onto the ground. If bricks or smaller blocks are used, or the wall is higher, a ribbon foundation will give more stability: simply dig a trench in the ground 20 cm wide and 15 cm deep, and fill with concrete.

## Filling and planting.

Your raised bed should be filled with a compost suitable for the plants that you wish to grow. See leaflet 'Easy Composts'. When you have filled the bed, water thoroughly and allow it to settle for several weeks. No matter how much you firm the compost, it will sink further! Ideally, at planting time the surface of the compost in the center of the bed should be above the top of the walls.

## When is the best time to plant?

The best time to plant is in March or April, when the soil has begun to warm up, but is still moist. In these conditions, roots grow vigorously and the plants will establish before the warmer, dryer weather arrives.

When planting, knock the plant out of the pot, and gently tease out the root tips. Dig a planting hole deep enough to accommodate the roots. Lower the roots in, add compost, firm gently with the finger tips. A generous watering completes the job!

Top dressing with gravel or stone fragments will improve the appearance, and suppress weeds.

September - October is also a good time if the weather has begun to cool and the soil is moist. You can plant at other times of year, but in summer you will need to ensure that your new plants do not go short of water. Never plant when frost is likely.

