

## Help Start Gardening Earlier in Spring

By making a raised garden bed or two in the early spring, home gardeners can plant earlier than planting in un-mounded soil.

Soil dries and warms up more quickly in the spring in raised beds. Reducing foot traffic on the beds themselves reduces soil compaction, a bane to growing plants. Make the raised beds narrow enough that the center of each bed can be planted, watered and weeded from a footpath beside the bed.



To make simple raised beds, choose a well-drained site with a minimum of six hours of sunlight per day, preferably near a water source. Beds should be only as wide as can be easily worked from either side and as long as desired. Because of the work involved, try one or two beds first. If you like the results, add on more next season.

If the soil is compacted, wait to prepare the bed until the soil is dry enough to pulverize into small chunks. Spread a two- to three-inch layer of organic material over the soil surface. Organic material can include compost, sawdust, ground bark, leaves, chipped pruning materials, manures or planting mix. Adding an additional source of nitrogen helps the organic material break down more efficiently.

Rototill or spade the organic material, supplemental nitrogen, any other amendments, and soil down to a depth of six inches. With a shovel and rake, shape the bed. Shovel a walkway area, about a foot and one-half wide, to a depth of six inches.

Add the excavated soil to the top of the bed. Finished raised beds should be eight to 12 inches higher than the paths. Level the top of the bed with a rake. Add sawdust or bark to the paths between beds for a less muddy walking surface.

Plant seeds or transplants so they are evenly spaced as the season progresses. Fertilize and water as needed. Keep walkways as dry as possible to minimize weeds. Place stakes at the corners of the beds to prevent the hose from dragging across plants.

Organic material constantly decomposes and disappears, so replenish your raised beds with compost regularly. Cover the beds with two inches of leaves, compost or a cover crop like crimson clover or fava beans each autumn. Turn under cover crop or leaves in spring, and plant again the next year.

Once the beds have gone through the improvement process, roto-tilling should be unnecessary. Light spading or forking will then create a suitable bed for planting. As time goes on, soil will keep loosening and you will be able to garden almost year round. Raised beds don't necessarily have to be neatly contained by wooden boards, as the magazines show. Plants grow just as well on raised soil without the fancy frames.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact the Farm Advisor's office at [cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu](mailto:cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu) or 754-6477 with your agricultural questions. Talk to a certified Master Gardener every Wednesday, 10:00-12:00, 754-2880.