Making Raised Beds

One of the secrets to growing organic veg is to cultivate a living soil and one of the secrets to cultivating a living soil, is to grow your veg in raised beds. This doesn't necessarily mean wooden sided beds – raised beds can simply be areas of mounded earth, divided up by permanent paths. There are a few benefits to this set up – the 'raised' bit means that veg get the good drainage they all need to grow healthily, avoiding waterlogging. The crucial thing for encouraging a living soil though, is that these beds are split up by permanent paths. This means you never have to walk over your growing space, compacting the soil, crushing microbe habitat and restricting plant root growth. Beds, that are walked on, have to be dug over every year to relieve this tension, but happily, with raised beds, you can skip this very boring and back breaking job!

Building beds

So, to build a good set of raised beds, firstly, plan where they will go and how big they will be. The maximum width for a bed is 1.2m. This is where the bed can be surrounded by paths and the width allows you to reach every part of the bed from either the front or back path. For a bed up against a wall or fence, it should be narrower - the maximum width is 70cm.

Next, you need to raise the earth somehow and build the paths and I bunch these two together as a step because how you do one often affects how you do the other. There are lots of options here – beds can be mounded earth (as illustrated overleaf), or with sides made from wood (as above) or recycled plastic. Paths can be plain earth, woodchip (illustrated below), paved or grass, for example. There are benefits and draw backs of each, so it's worth thinking it through to see what would work for you. I've detailed a couple of good scenarios on the following pages, with their advantages and disadvantages spelled out and a few options for how to adjust them to suit your needs.

Scenario 1 – my preferred set up from a maintenance point of view – mounded earth beds and woodchip paths. These are shown in the photo below and they are simple and cheap to make. I find this the easiest system to maintain and find it doesn't attract pests in the same way the solid sided beds do. This type of bed system needs a large, open area for a veg garden, rather than beds surrounding, say, a lawn or patio.

1. Prepare the space so that it is one large area of bare soil. For converting rough grass or lawn it is helpful to have this area laid under mulch (e.g. cardboard or a deep layer of plant materials) for as long as possible before digging it over – at least 6 months is ideal, but even a month is helpful. This makes the job much easier than having to strip turf by hand. Alternatively, hire a rotovator, turf stripping machine or turf stripping landscape gardener. These methods are more brutal to soil life than the mulch and dig over method. This will recover over time of course, so weigh up for yourself which approach works for you.
2. Divide the space up into beds and paths, using a tape measure and string lines or canes laid flat on the ground so you can see what's going on. Beds are a maximum of 1.2m wide and paths around 50cm wide. Arrange them however seems nice to you, bearing in mind access from the house/shed/greenhouse/compost area and a source of water.
3. Using a garden spade, slice layers of path soil out to a depth of around10cm, piling this soil onto the beds. If your soil is very hard or sticky clay, or is a very loose sandy soil, mix in compost as you go to help improve the soil structure. Use a rake to rake paths smooth and beds into a gently curving mound.
4. Fill paths with woodchip, to a depth of around 5-10cm. It's important that beds remain taller than paths. The best woodchip can be bought (or sometimes sourced for free) from local tree surgeons in winter time, when there are no leaves mixed in with it. Summer woodchip is also fine – it just won't last as long. Avoid chip from leylandii as this doesn't agree with vegetables. Straw or cardboard can also be used to cover paths, or simply leave plain soil. Avoid weed suppressant membrane/landscape fabric! (see box below) I'm sorry, but there is nothing you can do to avoid weeding paths. Woodchip makes this easier than plain earth as it stays looser and so makes forking weeds out easier. Keep on top of this and it never becomes too much of a problem. Your mulches will need topping up every year or so.

Landscape fabric is often recommended for use in paths. However, it is problematic for numerous reasons and I urge you to avoid it! It only protects from weeds for a year or so, after which weeds can get a toe hold and can be even harder to remove once they become entangled in your fabric. It destroys soil structure, increasing problems with waterlogging and drought. It provides the perfect conditions for the most problematic of weeds – those with creeping roots, which will thrive beneath it, giving you many years' worth of weeding headaches as they continually pop out the sides.. If that wasn't enough, it is, of course, also made of plastic, which gradually breaks down into microfibres that will contaminate your soil. Loose or biodegradable mulches on paths (woodchip, straw or cardboard) are much better choices.

Note that it is possible to use mounded earth beds next to areas of grass or with grass paths between, but this takes quite a lot of maintenance to stop the grass from creeping into the beds. The beds will need re-edging with a spade or edging iron at least once a year to reclaim bed from path. I don't tend to recommend gravel, just because it is difficult to weed. Paved paths set into concrete need no weeding, but have foundations that interfere with the beds. Paving slabs set loosely onto soil or a layer of sand can work, but will need weeding between and can create slug and ant habitat, although in drier parts of the country, slugs might not be such a problem.

Scenario 2

Solid sided beds can look really snazzy, compared to simple mounded earth beds. They can be a bit of a spend, but if you are good with woodwork, wooden ones can be made fairly cheaply from reclaimed wood, (like those below), or for bit more money, they can be bought as kits. You can also get recycled plastic raised bed kits. Beds should be filled with top soil and topped with a 2 inch (5cm) layer of compost. If the soil is either very clay dominant (sticky and mouldable when wet) or is very loose and sandy (cannot be rolled into a ball that holds its shape when wet) then add compost and mix this in as you fill the beds.

Being taller, this type of bed can be a bit easier to use for those with bad backs and there is never a problem with weeds creeping from paths into beds, so they can be really easy to keep tidy. The issues with these though, are that you will have more problems with slugs and ants, who both love to hang out next to the solid edges of the beds. Creeping weeds, such as couch grass and bindweed can also become problematic if they get into these beds and they also love to hang out at the edges, with their roots clustering up against the solid sides. Be very rigorous in removing every last trace of any plants like these - those with long, creeping, fleshy roots.

Solid sided beds can have almost any type of path – the lowest maintenance being permanently paved paths. Grass works nicely if you use a strimmer to cut it. With a lawnmower, you'll find you'll either need to live with tufty grass around the edges of the bed, or you'll need to get the shears out to deal with this if it bothers you. Woodchip or bare earth can work too and will just need you to keep on top of keeping them weed free. Again, I don't recommend gravel or landscape fabric.