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Extension News by Mark Keaton: It's time to start work on raised beds

If you are going to use raised beds this spring, now is the time to start working on them. Then you will be ready to go when the weather starts to warm up and you want to get out and do something.

Raised bed gardening isn't new, but it is an excellent way for a lot of people to have fresh vegetables. Permanent beds raised a few inches off the ground and wide enough to reach across can be used to grow vegetables and small fruit. Growing plants in rows originated with the horse and plow and has continued until today.



There are many benefits of raised beds. Yields are higher, due to more space being used to grow plants and less for pathways. Compost and fertilizer are spread only on beds and not wasted on pathways. The untrodden soil remains uncompacted and better drained. The plants shade the soil, decrease evaporation and keep roots cooler. Irrigation only is used on the beds and not pathways. High plant populations in the beds crowd out weeds. The need to frequently till the garden is eliminated. Most weeds can easily be controlled by hand weeding.

The soil in raised beds can be worked earlier in the season because of good drainage and the soil warms earlier in the season. Rainy weather is less a hindrance. Plants can be rotated from bed to bed to prevent build-up of pests, both insects and disease.

Any size or shape of bed can be used. They should be a size that is easy to work around and should be a width that can be worked all the way across from both sides. Three feet wide is a common size. Several beds are easier to handle than one very long bed. This also makes crop rotation easier. Beds at least 6 inches high will improve drainage. Paths between beds should be wide enough to allow movement of equipment and to be able to work.

Crops to be grown in beds should be given some thought. They should be things that the family likes and should fit the area. Melons usually take up a lot of room that could be used for lots of other vegetables. Lay beds out before construction begins to make sure everything is like you want.

Even though plants shade the soil and less moisture is lost to evaporation, more water may be needed because of higher plant populations. Drip irrigation or soaker hoses are better than sprinkler irrigation because only the beds are watered. Take a soil test before spring to see what fertilizers are needed and adjust pH if needed.

For information on raised bed gardening, call University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service at 425-2335.

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