



PHOTO BY Billy Jenke

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"What are you going to discuss in your next column?" Gardeners ask this on occasion and my response is that I usually will not know until I sit before my keyboard and computer screen. Other times, the subject just screams, "Hello . . . Can you hear me now . . . Can you hear me now!" Reality presented itself through a phone call to the office when the caller asked, "What do I do when my vegetable garden in my backyard looks like a shallow swimming pool?" The gentleman did not appear to be in a humorous mood

so suggesting hydroponic gardening as an alternative was prudently dismissed. Where soil drainage or excessive moisture is a problem, a practical option would be to establish raised beds. It is much easier to plead the case for raised beds after an extended period of high rainfall such as the weather we have had over the past few weeks. Most weather forecasters are predicting rainy weather to occur over the week and its vegetable planting time for serious gardeners. Gardeners are able to plant earlier in the

season because the soil is warmer and better drained when it is above ground level. However, there are other benefits to gardening in raised beds. A good way to compensate for the lack of space is by gardening in raised beds. This also helps to overcome a major challenge to most gardeners in our area: less-than-perfect soil, whether it's gumbo clay that is sticky with poor drainage or extremely sandy soil that dries out quickly. And, the rewards of raised beds can be well worth the effort. Once established,



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they are easier to maintain and a well-tended garden can supply you and your family with a variety of nutritious vegetables to be enjoyed fresh or preserved. When space is limited, a plentiful harvest of such crops as tomatoes, peppers, eggplant and okra can be produced by a few properly cared for plants.

SITE SELECTION

Most vegetables do best when planted in a site that receives full sun. However, most vegetables can also tolerate some shade but a minimum of eight hours of direct exposure to sun is recommended. Raised beds should also be conveniently located close to a water supply.

MAKE A PLAN

Plan your garden so that the available space can be used wisely. For small areas, select those crops that your family will like best and that will produce an adequate supply of produce with just a few plants. Also, plan to use the space continuously by planting another in-season crop soon after the last harvest is completed. Plant tall-growing plants together on the north side of the garden so they will not shade lower-growing plants.

CREATE A BED AND PREPARE THE SOIL

Now comes the hard work. The success of your raised-bed garden depends on good preparation. Landscape timbers or dimension lumber such as 2x4's or 2x6's can be used to build raised beds. Use treated lumber or rot-resistant lumber such as cypress. Cinder blocks and landscape pavers can also be used but shifting and settling of blocks and pavers can be an issue over time. Raised beds are easier to maintain and weed, produce larger yields, and can be an attractive component to the home landscape. When constructing raised beds, I recommend a minimum height of 8 inches; in fact, the higher you build the beds, the better. The most common height is 11", which is the height of two stacked 2" x 6" boards. The vegetable beds at the

Master Gardener Demonstration Garden in Carbide Park range from 8-to-36 inches in height. I also recommend use of a high quality garden soil mix to fill the boxes. Remember to add generous amounts of compost, well-rotted manure or other sources of organic matter periodically to maintain good soil structure.

A convenient width for most raised beds is 3-4 feet wide (depending on what you plan to grow) but wider width beds may be desired in some situations. Beds can be made to any length desired. Space beds far enough apart to allow ample room for easy access and maintenance.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS OF RAISED BEDS

Raised beds warm up earlier in the spring and dry out faster after a soaking rain. This allows the soil to be worked and planted earlier, extending the season a week or more. The wide edges of landscape timbers provide handy seats, too, while weeding or harvesting.

Homegrown flavor and the fun of watching things grow can be even easier and more productive in raised beds. Our spring vegetable growing season will soon be underway. Why not get your vegetable garden off the ground—literally—with raised beds?

