

Let's Talk Gardening

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Building a Raised Bed

After last week's article, you went out and bought your lawn fertilizer. Right? Well now is the time to apply it. If you're like me, I can usually remember things if I associate them with something. In the spring, I associate lawn fertilizing with income tax day. It's usually warm enough by then and the ground has usually warmed up enough that the grass will benefit from the fertilizer. If you don't get it down for a couple of weeks, it's no big deal though. Anytime in the next 2-3 weeks is OK.

Just the other day, I ran across an article I wrote a long time ago about building a raised bed and thought that it might bear repeating at this time of year. It's a fairly simple thing to do if you have a minimum of instructions...and that's what this amounts to...a minimum of instructions. Good luck.

The materials list is pretty short. You need something to make the sides out of and something to put the sides together with and then some soil to fill it up with. End of materials list.

The sides can be made out of almost anything that is reasonably permanent and resists water and erosion. Most people use the 3 inch x 4 inch x 8 feet "landscape" timbers that you can get at any home improvement center or maybe even at your favorite nursery. You could also use 2 inch x 10 or 12 inch x 8 feet treated boards. You may use concrete blocks.

The beds should be 4 feet by 8 feet in size; i.e., just wide enough that you can reach the middle of the bed without straining too much. It should be at least two, and preferably three, timbers high. This means that you'll have to saw two or three of the timbers in the middle to make four or six pieces 4 feet long.

Let's assume that you're going to use the 3 x 4 timbers to make your beds. Start building your bed(s) by trying to level the ground where they will be located. This is no big deal if your location is reasonably flat--the beds don't have to be perfectly level to work just fine.

Drill two half inch holes in each of the 4 ft. pieces and 3 half inch holes in the 8 ft. pieces. It's not too important where the holes are drilled, just about a foot in from the ends and in the middle on the longer one. You'll need to get either 1 foot long pieces of 3/8 inch "rebar" or some of those really big nails that are about a foot long. The place where you buy the timbers will have them. Just ask.

Lay one of the 4 ft. end pieces on the ground and drive two of the pieces of rebar into the holes and all the way down. These hold the bed in place. Next, lay an 8 ft. side piece perpendicular (90 degrees) to the end piece so that the end of the side touches the side of the end. Try to be sure that the angle formed is close to 90 degrees in order that the bed will be reasonably square. Drive 3 pieces of rebar or nails into the ground.

Place the other side on the ground but don't drive in the rebar/nails just yet. Next lay the end piece down and be sure that the whole thing lines up and actually makes a rectangle and that the ends meet to form a reasonably tight corner. Once you're happy with how the bed lines up go ahead and drive in the rebar/nails to hold the bed in place.

Now all you have to do is put on the other layers and nail them into place. Drill a quarter-inch hole where each nail is to go—it makes it easier to drive the nail. Be sure to offset the ends of each layer with the preceding layer and nail them down tightly. You don't want the soil "leaking" out at the corner. But if it does leak a little, who cares? It's no big deal.

Once you get it 2-3 layers tall, that's it. Go to Gardenville, Fertile Gardens, or your favorite place to buy soil and get enough to fill up your new beds. Tell the salesperson that your bed is 4 ft. x 8 ft. x 8 or 12 in. deep. Then the salesperson can tell you how much soil it will take. It'll be a pickup load. If you don't have a pickup, ask one of your neighbors if you can borrow one. Of course, they'll deliver the soil right to your driveway, too, but if you are only going to be making one or two beds, it's not worth the cost. Be sure to get "garden" soil and not "landscape" soil. There is a difference. Ask.

Now, if you want to use concrete blocks, the process is the same except that you need a little help on getting them straight. No big deal. Take two small pieces of board and tie a string about 10 ft. long between them. Drive each stake into the ground so that the string is stretched tight where the long side of the bed is to be placed. Scrape off the grass and kinda level the ground a little and start laying the blocks end to end to form the first side. Lay the blocks just under or inside the string so that they don't quite touch the string. Then lay the 3 end-blocks inside the row you just laid and use a square to be sure that the corners are square. Then move the stakes and string to the other side and lay out the other side's blocks. You might wanna lay the other end blocks in place to be sure that the second side lines up with the second end. Tada! You're done. You don't have to use any nails/rebar to hold them down—especially if you fill the holes with soil.

Using concrete blocks is kinda neat when you set them on the ground with the holes in the vertical position; this way you can plant two radishes or two green onions, or one small flowering plant in each hole...assuming, of course, that you fill up the holes with garden soil. Neato.

Send your ideas, questions, or comments to: gardener@gvtc.com