

Raised Beds

Last summer, I was given some recycled redwood lumber. I recently used it to make a raised gardening bed. If shop space is available, winter is a great time to do this type of project

During the growing season, raised beds are useful for many things. For example, the soil may be too rocky to cultivate easily or it may have other qualities that make it impractical to grow plants. Additionally, it is possible for those who have back problems or cannot easily bend over to tend their garden at a more comfortable height. I recently spoke to a dedicated gardener who, because of back problems, had to lie down on his side in the garden soil to harvest the crops. A raised garden bed would make it possible for him to garden without this inconvenience.

Raised beds are constructed from varying materials including corrugated sheet metal, PVC plastic used for fencing, straw bales, composite decking materials and lumber of various types. Metal, plastic and composites are relatively permanent but may be somewhat difficult to blend naturally into the landscape if they are used for both cultivating plants and ornamentals. Also, depending on the grade of PVC, they may bow over time.

Wood products are not permanent but can create a more organic feel when used correctly. The longevity of wood beds depends on several factors. Construction lumber, including spruce, Douglas fir, pine, etc., is not rot resistant but is the least expensive type of lumber. Certain wood preservatives can be used to somewhat extend the usable life of the wood. Depending on how the wood is cared for and if it is treated, expect a usable life of three to five years.

Pressure-treated lumber is sometimes used for raised beds. This type of lumber is usually stained green or red when purchased and should not be confused with actual redwood. There are things to be aware of when using this type of lumber during construction and when growing certain vegetables. When cutting with power saws, use a respirator since the dust is potentially toxic. Sweep up and dispose of all sawdust and do not allow children to come into contact with it. When raising root crops such as carrots and beets, grow them at least 6 inches away from the edge of the treated lumber. Expect beds made from treated lumber to last between four and six years.

There are some naturally rot resistant woods available. The most common is redwood. Redwood is more expensive than treated or construction lumber. It is relatively light and easy to work with. Western red cedar, often sold as just cedar, is rot resistant and is widely available. Expect up to 10 years of use out of either type.

Occasionally, rot resistant lumber harvested from locally grown trees such as black locust or Osage orange is available from local arborists or specialty lumber companies. Check with local businesses if interested in using this type of lumber.

- USU Extension Forester Michael Kuhns contributed to this column.

