



HOME

The Edible Garden

Create a raised bed in your backyard with the help of local experts

BY ALISON GWINN

A wise person once said that if you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need. We might add lemonade (or a martini) to that list, but we think the overall sentiment is spot on. There's something satisfying—even hopeful—about growing veggies in your own backyard. And in Denver, where the soil is clay-based and the growing season is short, raised beds are a smart, attractive (and less weedy) way to do it. But gardens are like children: They take patience and vigilance. If you're a newbie, heed these tips from local experts.

① **HERE COMES THE SUN.** Situate your bed(s) in an area that gets six hours of sun a day. Ethan Page, chief operations manager at the Urban Farm Company of Colorado (urbanfarmcolorado.com), which installs backyard organic gardens from start to finish, says his team uses a tool called a solar pathfinder to map the path of the sun and find an optimal

space—but you can do it on your own. If an area gets too much sun (a real possibility in Colorado), he suggests covering the bed in a hail and shade fabric attached to PVC hoops; it will allow in some sunlight but cut out the really intense rays. (Also, be aware of putting a garden right next to a house, where it will pick up radiant heat.)

“I LIKE RAISED BEDS FOR THEIR AESTHETIC QUALITIES AS WELL AS THEIR FUNCTIONAL ONES.” — *Sharon Withers*



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② **SIZE MATTERS.** “You can grow a lot of vegetables in a 4-foot-by-4-foot bed,” says Sharon Withers, who has been planting raised-bed gardens for two decades. “I think it’s a good idea to start small, but when you’re putting in that first bed, have a plan for where you might want to expand in the future.” (Page says the most popular size bed at Urban Farm is twice that size: 4 by 8 feet.) How high should you go? The sides of most beds are 1 to 2 feet high; the taller the bed, the less bending over you have to do to tend crops and the less likely rabbits will invade. Withers builds her beds out of red cedar, often with corrugated galvanized steel sides; never use pressure-treated lumber, she says, as the chemicals in the wood can leech into the soil.

③ **PREP SCHOOL.** Once you know where you are going to place the frame of your bed, “remove the grass and weeds and level the ground inside the bed, so there are no high spots or low spots and there will be good drainage,” Page says. Usually, Urban Farm does not put down fabric first, unless there are really insidious weeds like bindweed in the soil underneath.

④ **YOU GET OUT WHAT YOU PUT IN.** Pay attention to the soil in your bed. “One of the advantages of a raised bed is that you can improve your soil more easily than planting in the ground, because you control what goes in and how it goes in,” Withers says. “And you won’t walk on it, so the soil won’t get as compacted.”

⑤ **WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE.** “Most people use an automated drip irrigation system, with mini soaker lines,” Withers says. “But watering by hand with a hose can be a very therapeutic time, taking you away from the busyness of

the day and letting you get to know your plants.” Page says that Urban Farm suggests eight to 12 minutes a day of water during the heat of the summer; set timers for early morning, when the plants are just waking up. And remember: If Denver is having a very rainy spring, and your seedlings are getting flooded, you can always cover the bed to control the moisture.

⑥ **GO EARLY AND STAY LATE.** “You can seed certain plants a little earlier in a raised bed because the soil will be warmer than in the surrounding ground,” according to Withers, “and you can probably get an extra crop in in the fall of lettuce and maybe mâche, a green that can be harvested with light snow on it.” Page says Urban Farm plants cold-hardy crops like lettuces, spinach, arugula and kale, as well as root crops like carrots, beets and onions, in mid-April and then comes back in mid-May to plant warmer-weather crops like tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squashes and zucchini. He suggests planting eight to 10 crops in a 4-by-8-foot bed. In the fall, rip out all the dead plants, compost the soil and cover the bed in straw to keep in the moisture and nutrients over the winter.

⑦ **A WELL-MADE BED.** “I like raised beds for their aesthetic qualities as well as their functional ones,” Withers says. “You can make your raised beds architectural so they become part of a landscape’s design. We just did a modern plan for one that incorporates different heights of beds, and different shapes—rectangles and squares—but they’ll all connect. You can also kick them up a notch and make them really pretty with flowers that spill over the edge, artwork, gazing balls or an exterior made out of a wood like mahogany.” **DLM**

THE DIRT ON DIRT

Soil scientist Kathy Doesken, founder of ROCKY MOUNTAIN SOIL STEWARDSHIP, uses a method called sheet composting or modified lasagna gardening: After watering the soil and pricking it with a spading fork, sprinkle on an active composting mix. Then add 10-12 inches of a composting mix (half dried leaves, half manure and enough water to hold them together). Fork the mixture loosely; do not walk on it. Water until it is at least 50 percent moisture (if a clump sticks together and is shiny with water, you’re good). Optional: Add composting worms every 3 feet. Cover the entire surface with five layers of newspapers (nothing glossy), sprinkling them with water as you go. Last, add a surface of chopped, dry leaves. Hold the leaves down with construction fence or bird netting. Let it sit as long as possible, watering regularly. To plant, pull back the netting and leaves, cut a slice in the wet newspapers, add a little vericompost in the bottom of the hole and place your seedlings. rmsoilstewardship.com