

Beyond Digging – No Dig Gardens

Autumn is a great time to plant a new garden, but for those of us averse to digging, the hardest part can be getting started. Spadework is at its most off-putting where heavy soil is hard to dig, let alone being conducive to healthy plant growth. Poor soils, both heavy and light, can be renovated with plenty of organic matter, but it can take years to reach good results.

The simple answer lies in building garden beds above the soil. Raised beds have been used for centuries for good reason – they're better for plants and they're easier on gardeners. Whether you want to grow trees, shrubs, perennials or vegetables, building raised beds is the best way to bypass heavy digging and ideal for any gardener limited by lack of space, or impaired physical ability.

Raised beds can be planted, weeded and harvested without ever walking on the soil, and therefore avoiding compaction and promoting better plant growth. Also, the warmer well-drained conditions in raised beds mean you can often plant earlier and harvest later than the ground conditions allow.

The dimensions will depend on what fits best with the garden's design but for convenient access, the ideal width for each bed is about 1m. Walls should be at least 300mm high, but the average seat height of 450mm is ideal, especially if capped with a solid edge wide enough for sitting. Sides may be built from wooden sleepers, concrete blocks or bricks. Choose a nontoxic building material, especially if you plan to grow fruit and vegetables. Construction must be sturdy enough to hold together when filled with soil, which means timber walls must be braced securely at the corners. Solid masonry walls need weep holes at their base.

The term 'no-dig' garden refers mainly to vegetable growing, where a bottomless box is filled with layers of nutrient rich organic material; compost, manure and straw. But the growing medium you choose to fill your beds will depend on what you want to grow, and what is locally available. In any case, it is important to invest in good-quality ingredients, including generous amounts of compost. While drainage is important, overly light mixes can lead to problems with drying out.

Suggested Products: Living Earth Compost; Living Earth Garden Mix; Nutrasoil – available in bulk and bags from Central Landscape Supplies – free loan trailers available

Controlled release fertilizer is best for raised beds. For an organic vegetable garden, blood and bone is the popular choice, along with well-rotted animal manures (fresh manure will burn roots). Available from Central Landscape Supplies, **Nitra-King** is a controlled release fertilizer designed for winter use. It comes in 2kg, 10kg & 22.7kg bags.

Suggested Products: Nitra King – available at Central Landscape Supplies

Good soil structure and fertility can be maintained over the years by regularly adding organic matter as mulch. This will also help suppress weeds.

Suggested Products: Reharvest Mulches; Compost Mulch

So if you'd rather not dig, or simply can't, the no-dig garden is well worth investing in. For gardeners prone to a bad back or sore knees, a raised bed can put an end to aches and pains. The pay off for extra time and money spent at the outset are years of easy gardening.

How to build a no-dig vege garden

1. Choose a sunny sheltered spot, away from large trees.
2. Measure and peg out beds. For a bed that is reached from both sides 1 to 1.2m is the optimum width to avoid having to walk on the soil. Allow at least 300mm for paths between beds.
3. Construct walls at least 300mm tall, but no higher than 450mm for easy access. The heavier the soil, the deeper the beds should ideally be.
4. Lay a 50mm thick layer of overlapping newspaper.
5. Lay pads of pea straw or Lucerne hay over the newspaper.
6. Sprinkle blood and bone. Add a 20cm layer of loose straw and sprinkle more blood and bone.
7. Add a 20cm layer of compost.
8. Repeat layers of straw, manure and compost until beds are full.
9. An organic no-dig vege garden will last several years, with layers topped up each year. After about five years, growth may become less vigorous, a sign that it's time to replace the old soil with fresh material.