


# Rosebud Community Garden

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## Raised garden beds

### To build or not to build?

First think about why you want to build a raised garden bed. By not raising you will save money, materials and labour, and the bed will maintain direct soil connection. It will also give you the opportunity to do some bending.

### Advantages

Building a raised bed can have the following advantages:

- helps keep everything neat and tidy
- contains mulch
- provides a barrier to weeds and some other pests
- provides a good working height – important if you have back issues or are confined to a wheelchair
- may facilitate the fixing of nets or other barriers.

### How high?

A bed one 'sleeper' (approx. 200 mm) high will cater for some of the above but if you have a bad back and don't want to or are unable to bend you will probably need to make the bed four sleepers high. If you are in a wheelchair, three sleepers high may be better.

### Size and shape

This will depend on a range of factors but the main consideration is not to make the bed too wide – you need to be able to reach into and work in all parts of the bed from the outside, and you do not want to have to step on the bed or the soil will become compacted. The materials you use to make the bed will also determine shape and size: flexible materials are more suited to round beds; heavy (thick) timber can span long lengths without support; lightweight materials can be used for smaller beds or strengthened by the use of vertical posts. A more complex option is to make use of vertical space with either a tiered arrangement or a vertical garden, various options are available commercially.

### Materials

When selecting materials to make the bed, the main considerations are sustainability, cost, durability and workability.

Some options are:

- timber, logs or sawn; thick or thin – species discussed below
- corrugated iron, horizontal or vertical
- ferro-cement – better if curved
- apple crates, wine barrels cut in half, various other containers, timber from pallets
- off the shelf
- straw bales – will last approximately three years, then use as mulch.

## Construction

The method of construction depends on the material being used to make the bed. We are using sleepers (heavy, rigid timber) and the steps to make a raised bed 800 mm high are:

- For each of the layers, measure and cut sides and ends (make sure cuts are square).
- Drill two clearance holes in each corner of each end .
- Screw ends to sides to form a rectangle.
- Place the first layer on the ground, measure diagonals to ensure it is 'square' and make sure the first layer is level all around.
- Place a second layer on top of first layer and continue to the required height.
- Attach each layer to the one below it, either by skew screwing or using a timber 'strap' in each corner.
- Attach plastic liner, preferably using some cover strap. Lining will slow drainage and give protection from the aggressive internal environment.

## Fill

What to fill with? If the bed is 800 mm high, you only need growing medium for the top 300–400 mm. The bottom 400 mm depends on what you have on hand. It needs drainage but not too fast, and could be a wicking reservoir. The material can be organic or inorganic. Organic material is preferable as it will become plant food over time, will hold moisture and is sequestering carbon; it could be bales, wood (logs) or mulch.

For the top half (the growing medium) you need to consider nutrients (major and minor) and minerals and structure. For example, a mixture of soil, compost and worm castings – then mulch on top.

## Timber

When selecting timber, consider whether it is local, its durability and its workability.

- Treated pine (CCA) is a carcinogen – they say it is locked in but there are still questions about this.
- White cypress (*Callitris Glaucophylla*), which is mostly from NSW and QLD.
- Cypress *Macrocarpa* is durable but not as durable as white cypress. It can be sourced locally.
- Red gum, iron bark and other durable hardwoods. These are not as easily workable.
- Recycled sleepers etc are good but can be hard to work – watch out for embedded stone, steel bolts and nails.

## More

Searching the internet with 'raised beds' will provide plenty of ideas and alternatives.