

What Soil Should I Use to Fill My Raised Beds?

By Wendy Hunter

If you have sandy soil that drains too fast or clay soil that holds too much water, raised beds are a great solution to let you control the soil for optimal plant growth. Plus, you don't have to bend over to work on your garden! But what should you fill them with?

The Ideal Mix

A good starting point for raised bed soil is 50% high-quality topsoil and 50% compost. Mix these components together well before filling your raised bed. Choose a topsoil that is free of large clumps and debris. You may have soil in your own yard that is acceptable. Adding compost to the topsoil provides essential nutrients and improves the soil structure. Compost is decomposed organic matter that enriches the soil, enhances moisture retention, and supports beneficial microbes that promote plant growth.

You also may consider adding aeration materials like sand or pumice to this starting mix which can help prevent compaction and keep roots from sitting in soggy soil.

Since Southern California's climate is hot and dry for much of the year, some gardeners in very dry climates add coconut coir or peat moss to improve the soil's ability to hold moisture. Limit the amount to 5-10% of the soil mix. Also, be aware that peat moss lacks nutrients so you don't want to use too much, and it is harvested from peat bogs so its use has a negative environmental impact.

Boost Soil for Productivity

After filling the bed, apply a layer of mulch on top of your soil mixture to regulate soil temperature, retain moisture, and prevent weed growth. Mulch is a protective layer that shields the soil from extreme temperatures and reduces water evaporation, making it particularly valuable in hot, dry climates. Organic mulch, such as straw, wood chips, or shredded leaves, gradually decomposes and contributes organic matter to the soil over time.

Continue to regularly add compost on top of your soil every planting season to replenish organic matter and support beneficial microbes that enhance plant health. This ongoing process builds rich, fertile soil that supports thriving plants season after season.

Avoid These Mistakes

One of the biggest mistakes gardeners make is using straight garden soil in raised beds. It tends to compact too much, reducing aeration and making it harder for plant roots to grow. Another common mistake is relying on synthetic fertilizers, which may provide an initial nutrient boost but do not contribute to long-term soil health. Also be wary of bagged soil mixes contain excessive amounts of wood chips, which can deplete nitrogen as they break down, leaving your plants struggling. To avoid these issues, always check the ingredients of any soil mix and prioritize organic materials.

Follow these tips for a great start and your raised beds will provide nutrient-rich, well-draining conditions for thriving plants all year long! Happy gardening!

For more tips on Beginning Vegetable gardening visit:
<https://www.mastergardenersd.org/beginning-vegetable-gardening/>

Wendy Hunter is a UC Master Gardener.