

How to Build a Raised-Bed Garden and Survive the Process

By: Betsy Bearden

Springtime! Time to focus on emerging flowers, blossoming trees, the migration of birds from the South, the world around you blooming in Technicolor ... and it's also time to focus on the ol' vegetable garden.

This is generally an easy thing for most people, but when you are married to a man such as my husband, Steven, not just any garden will do. No—it has to be a spectacular, extraordinary, get out the slide rule, compass, protractor, level, kind of thing. And not just a flat area of 20 square yards of Georgia Red Clay all tilled up with organic compost blended in. Nope, it has to be a grandiose raised-bed garden kind of thing, or nothing.

So, for ten years, we had no garden.

In Steven's defense: It would be a moderately expensive project and a time-consuming one at that, so as luck would have it, while we were taking a walk one day, we happened across a pile of landscape timbers laying in a heap at a utility trailer business. The timbers were 8x8, in good shape, but were riddled with two-foot long rods of rebar. After asking the store manager about them, he told us that the timbers had been abandoned by someone whose trailer had been involved in an accident. We gave him our phone number and asked him to give us a call if no one came back to claim them. A few weeks later, he told us to come get the timbers. Free of charge. Petty cool, huh? We brought the timbers home.

Steven rigged up a skill saw with an abrasive cutting wheel, cut the rebar from one side of the timber, and used a stainless-steel rod to hammer out the remaining rebar. Next, we leveled out an area where the timbers would be placed by digging and flattening out a trench. The timbers were stacked on top of each other, three rows high, and brackets were placed on the inside of each corner and screwed in to secure them. The outside corners were enclosed with wood planks which made a small seating area until we topped each corner with decorative wooden post caps.

“Are we done yet?” I had to ask that, especially since 2007 was one of the hottest summers we had experienced in many years. After we cleaned and stained the timbers, the raised-bed was transformed into a beautiful piece of garden art. I wanted to bring it into the house! We stood back and admired our creation. Now we needed to fill it with dirt; a *lot* of dirt.

After pricing bags of soil at home improvement stores over the Internet, and checking with a few contractors on their prices, we wondered whatever happened to the old saying, “dirt-cheap.” We decided to try a popular website where you can find just about anything in the world you want. After weeding through the prospects, Steven decided on the least expensive small company, and gave them a call.

He described our raised-bed garden to the man and asked if he could back a truck up to it and dump the dirt in without causing damage to the raised-bed garden. We emailed a picture of it to him and also pointed out that our backyard was slightly sloped. “No problem,” he assured us.

“Great!” we said. “When can we expect you?”

He told us he would call back later—after he had “found” some dirt.

After a few days, someone from his company called and said they were on their way over with the dirt. I dare call it a company; it was one guy and a few of his cousins who looked like they had just come from a hunting club. They showed up in a huge, old Chevy Crew Cab pickup truck, pulling a 20-foot dump-trailer behind it. I am convinced they learned how to drive this monstrosity in route!

They backed the truck into our yard, toward the gate. The next thing I saw was Steven, driving his van with a chain wrapped around the back bumper that was attached to the front bumper of their truck! His tires were squealing and whirring in the driveway with smoke coming out from under them, motor revving wildly—pulling their truck back toward the street!

“They got stuck!” Steven laughed. They tried again, but the truck was too heavy, and the slope of the yard would just not cooperate, so we moved on to “Plan B.”

We laid tarpaulins on the ground, as close to the gate as we could manage. When they lifted the trailer to dump the dirt, it got tangled in the overhead utility wires. After getting the trailer back down, they tried tilting it again. It wouldn’t function, so they wound up shoveling most of the dirt from the bed of the truck. I have to admit when he told us they had finally “found” some dirt, I think I know from where—the Atlanta Zoo. I have never quite smelled anything like it before.

Now, we had not had rain in over six weeks, but once you get four square yards of exposed dirt heaped in a huge honkin’ pile in your front yard, this tends to tempt the fate of the gods. Steven had gone to buy more tarpaulin because all we had was now *under* the dirt. The sky started getting darker and darker, the low rumble of thunder could be heard in the distance, and the whispering wind taunted, *Mud Fest, 2007!*

One of our neighbors frantically walked over and offered to cover it, but I assured him that Steven would be home very soon. He said he hoped so and would hate to see all that dirt turn to mud. *Me, too!*

Steven and I covered it and drove stakes in the ground to secure the huge, stinky mound of dirt just in time. Buckets of rain fell; the dirt never felt a drop. However, the next day presented yet another obstacle—getting the dirt from point A to point B, which was approximately 50 yards away. After gathering around the ol’ dirt pile, we decided the

only way was to attach the utility cart to the riding lawnmower, shovel in the dirt, and dump it into the garden. We calculated it would only take about a gazillion round-trips.

My job was to drive the lawn mower, with cart in tow, circle the raised-bed and back up to it. Now, I don't know about you, but I have not had classes on backing up a lawnmower with a utility cart full of dirt behind it. This equates to: Me driving the lawn mower+ backing it *and* the trailer up to the raised-bed=it might take me a few shots before I get it.

We shoveled the dirt, and removed the rocks, tree limbs, and debris from it. With the help of our dear friend, Wally, we managed to get the job done and were able to plant a fall crop of Romaine, Brussels sprouts, collards, and Kale. A few days after we planted, Cobb County was placed under Level 4 Draught Conditions.

I hope this story has not deterred you from building your own raised-bed garden, but if you do decide to build one, I'm sure you won't encounter the same problems we encountered. Maybe this year the much-needed rain will come, and we can all have a nice crop. Who knows? (If you would like to see the raised-bed garden we created, you can view it on my website at www.creativewrites.net.)

I encourage you to plant a garden of your own. There is nothing like watching it grow and enjoying fresh veggies harvested from your very own garden. Any veggies will do, but if you can find non-GMO, organic seeds and seedlings, then that's even better. Happy gardening!

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