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## A Hard Times Guide to Successful Vegetable Gardening

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### Raised Beds

The soaring cost of many basic food items, coupled with a general downturn in the economy, is enough to make the idea of growing your own food look appealing. For some, it can become a real necessity. For others, homegrown vegetables simply taste better.

At the same time, there are simple lessons to be learned before you can become a successful gardener. They are not complicated, for the most part and can be mastered with a little care and attention. These lessons are the focus of this series.

Looking for a better way to grow vegetables this year? Consider constructing a raised bed. The advantages far outweigh the initial investment of time and money.

Most gardeners find that raised beds are easier to maintain and promote better plant growth. Walking in a garden causes soil compaction, which can cause problems with drainage and oxygen availability to plant roots. It's also more difficult to weed when soil is compacted. With a raised bed, you can plant, weed and harvest without ever walking on the soil.

Raised beds can be filled with high-quality soil, and it's easy to add compost or other organic matter. Long-rooted plants, such as carrots, do especially well in this environment, because there are no stones to hinder their development.

Plants in raised beds get more sun and air circulation and they can make better use of water. You often can plant earlier and harvest later, because raised beds warm up early in the spring and stay warm later in the fall.

Raised beds also make ideal places to grow plants that can be invasive in a regular garden – such as mints and horseradish. But ease and convenience is the benefit many gardeners appreciate the most. If you get a bad back and sore knees every year from gardening, a raised bed may put an end to those aches and pains.

Raised vegetable beds are excellent for gardeners who have trouble with their backs and older people who don't have limited flexibility. They are also excellent for people in wheelchairs or with other disabilities and those who don't want to spend the summer on their knees in the garden.

To install a raised bed, first choose a sunny location and decide on the size and shape you want. Some gardeners till the soil before building raised beds, to provide additional room for root development.

Construct the frame with a nontoxic building material, such as stone, cinder blocks, bricks, untreated wood or fiberglass. Some garden centers and catalogs now offer raised bed frames that snap together and can easily be taken apart.

Make sure the frame is between 12 and 16 inches high and is sturdy enough to hold together when filled with soil. If you use boards, they must be secured at the corners with metal braces or screws, or nailed to a reinforcing block of wood inside the corners – if you nail into the ends of boards, they will split.

Fill the frame with a good-quality lightweight soil mix and add a generous amount of compost. Avoid using soil straight from the garden. It usually is too heavy and doesn't allow for proper drainage.

A well-constructed raised bed should last for years, and soil fertility can be maintained by adding organic matter. Raised beds have been used for centuries and with good reason – they're better for many plants and they're easier on gardeners.

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