

Tom's Garden

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Raised Bed Gardening

Many gardeners plan to grow vegetables and even cut flowers in raised beds. Those of us who have been planting this way for years know how much better this type of gardening is.

One of the many benefits of raised bed gardening is avoiding soil compaction. You want to be able to work in your beds without stepping into them. Beds should not be more than four feet wide so you can reach into the center from both sides. Some people think a three foot wide bed is more comfortable; or something in between. If you are going to place your raised bed next to a fence or wall, make it no more than 30 inches wide.



Also consider spacing between beds. Leave enough room for a garden cart or wheelbarrow, about three feet. I have found landscaping fabric in the bottom of the bed to be unnecessary.

Edging Material

Most people choose rot resistant wood for edging. It is the most economical option other than recycling other materials. Experts agree that the newer pressure-treated wood is much safer than the old copper-arsenate treated wood. The plastic lumber made for decking is a good option, although more expensive. There are many raised-bed kits available in various sizes and materials. The choices are endless.

Soil For Raised Beds

Most soil combinations work well for raised beds. Potting soil drains too quickly and you need more substance than potting soil provides. A balanced mixture of clay, loam, compost and manure is best. Bulk soil from your local nursery is good but will need to be amended. Don't expect perfect results the first year. Soil building takes time.

Raised beds drain well and are easier to weed than conventional gardens.

Pussy Willow

Pussy Willow (*Salix discolor*, *Salix cinerea*, *Salix caprea*).

The perfect addition to your ornamental garden. They are one of the first plants to bloom in the spring. Its flowers, or "catkins" are fluffy little blooms that resemble tiny cats.

The Chinese use pussy willow as a decoration for the lunar New Year.

It is believed to bring prosperity for the coming year. It is also a popular Easter decoration for Americans.

It is a relative of the willow family, often growing more as a shrub than a tree. Older specimens do become trees, but have weaker branches that don't support much weight. Pussy willows produce large amounts of nectar and pollen. This nectar supports local populations of beneficial insects and other wildlife. In some areas, as much as ten percent of the beneficial insect population lives on the produce of this plant!



Salix discolor

There are three different Salix species called "pussy willows." Salix discolor, or American pussy willow is most common in the Northern U.S. and up into Canada. Salix discolor has a reddish bud that slowly develops into a silvery-white catkin. As the catkin begins to flower, it will either turn yellow as a male blossom or remain white and fluffy as a female blossom. It can grow up to 20 feet tall, but can be kept shorter by pruning.

Salix caprea, the "goat willow," has small white catkins that get slightly larger and later have long tendril-like flowers.



Salix caprea

Goat willow has a dwarf habit, rarely growing more than 20 feet. It can be a stunning ornamental tree.

There is a sub-variety called Salix caprea pendula. It is also called "weeping pussy willow" with arched branches that droop downward. It adds unique beauty to a landscape.

Salix cinerea or "Grey willow" is the largest and can grow up to 50 feet as an older tree. When young it tends to have a bushy habit with stands of stalks about 15 feet.

Pussy willows, as with other willows are water-loving plants. They are full-sun plants but can tolerate part shade.

All Salix species prefer wet soil and boggy conditions. Plant them far away from septic tanks, sewer lines and drain lines. Their roots grow deep and will bore through pipes.

The best choice of soil is one that is rich and fertile, and filled with organic matter to hold water.

You really don't need to fertilize, just add compost around the base of the plant.

It is very easy to start new plants.

1. Take cuttings from new growth in early spring.
2. Select branches that are long enough to take a 12-18 inch long cutting from.
3. Cut at a 45 degree angle.
4. If there are leaves on the branch, remove all but about 6 inches at the top end. You can plant this straight into the soil or place the cutting in a container of water. Change the water every few days. It will take 2-3 weeks for roots to form. You will have a brand new plant.

Bromeliads

When you are looking for holiday plants consider bromeliads. These stunning tropical are ideal for holiday decorating. They have bold colors, fancy foliage and are tough enough that they don't need very much care during your busy holiday.

Bromeliads come in a variety of colors and shapes, so there are many styles to choose from. Guzmania bromeliads have bright green strap-like leaves with a bold flower stalk that can be orange, red, yellow or purple.

Another choice is Neoreglia bromeliad. These have striped foliage that surrounds a cup-like center that holds water. Some have pink, red, purple or orange foliage. Those with red blooms are especially suited for the holidays.



Guzmania bromeliad

These plants maintain their waxy bloom for weeks, if not months and rarely need any help or fuss. Just water them when the soil feels dry and place them in a bright location out of direct sun. That's all bromeliads need!

After blessing your home with color through the dark days of winter, the flower will fade and the mother plant usually dies. You will discover that there are baby plants or "pups" around the base. You can pot these up, grow them to maturity and have another batch of flowers. They are compact and collectible. You'll soon want to collect a rainbow of different varieties.

Some sources I have found for bromeliads include:

- *Bromeliadparadise.com
- *Etsy.com
- *Walmart
- *Local florist shops

