



## To Box or Not to Box Your Beds

A bed is the part of the garden where your plants are or will be planted. It is always important to distinguish between the beds and the paths, because you don't want people walking on the beds and compacting the soil. In the climate of Western Oregon, it is a good idea to have raised beds so that the soil will dry out and warm up faster in the spring. A raised bed is one in which the surface of the bed soil is at least several inches above the surface of the path soil. A raised bed is not the same thing as a boxed bed. A boxed bed is a bed that is surrounded by a wood or brick edging. Beds can be boxed without being raised, or raised without being boxed. Some successful local school gardens have boxed beds and some have un-boxed beds. Is it a good idea to box the beds in your school garden? Let's look at the pros and cons.

### Disadvantages of Boxed Beds

- **Expensive:** It costs \$80 in materials to construct one 3' x 10' bed 9 inches high with cedar, plus the increased cost of soil to fill it.
- **A lot more work:** Constructing, leveling, and filling the boxes takes a lot of time and hard work.
- **Not permanent:** Regular wood beds will rot away in only 4 years. Cedar, redwood, or treated lumber will last longer but cost more. Only brick or plastic lumber is relatively permanent.
- **Use up resources and cause pollution:** The energy used and pollution produced by harvesting or manufacturing and hauling the bed materials must be considered. Are cedar and redwood being harvested sustainably? Is treated lumber polluting the environment? You might want to investigate these questions.
- **Harbor slugs and snails:** Once slugs and snails get into these beds, they find many spaces to hide between the soil and the box where you cannot find them without digging up the whole bed.
- **Increase weed problems:** If your garden contains quack grass or bindweed, do not box the beds! These weeds love to grow right along the edges of boxes and are impossible to get out. All weeds will be more difficult to control along the box edges, both inside and out.
- **Limit use of garden equipment:** The boxes will make it impossible to use certain kinds of garden equipment (like rototillers) and more difficult to use others (like garden forks.)
- **Garden design is fixed:** It is difficult to move or re-design the size or shapes of beds when they are boxed.

### Advantages of Boxed Beds

- **Look neat:** This may be an important consideration in a courtyard or school entrance.
- **Clarify boundaries:** The kids are less likely to walk on the beds.
- **Beds are useful all the way to edges:** You eliminate the unplantable sloped edges of un-boxed beds. However, you also increase weed problems along edges (see above).
- **Keep soil out of path and path bark out of beds:** With unboxed beds, you will need to cover paths with plastic tarps during extensive digging activities such as harvesting potatoes.
- **Can make higher raised beds:** Box sides will hold the soil up higher than if you just pile it up. This can be important for disabled gardeners or if the base soil is really poor.
- **Essential on slopes:** At least the downhill side of beds must be boxed on slopes to form flat terraces for planting.
- **Can be banded with copper to keep out slugs and snails:** If you staple a band of copper completely around a wooden bed box before any slugs or snails get in, it will keep them out.
- **If tall enough, can be used on pavement or over covered soil:** If you have no garden space other than pavement which you cannot tear up, building boxed beds on top is your only option. If your soil is too contaminated with chemicals or really bad weeds to grow crops in it, you can cover it with heavy-duty landscape cloth and put high-sided (at least 18") boxed beds on top. In general, we do not recommend putting a barrier between your soil surface and the bed soil because roots need to go down and worms and other critters need to come up.