

## The Beginner's Garden

# Raised Bed Soil Options

for any budget

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Growing a home garden in raised beds has recently surged in popularity. And for good reason. Raised beds are beautiful, easy to maintain, and fit well in small spaces.

But in my conversations with beginning gardeners, one challenge continues to surface. **Soil.** What kind of soil do you

fill your bed with? Is native soil okay? What about bagged soil from the garden center?

Not far behind these questions come questions of cost. Many gardeners are blindsided with sticker shock. For those of us who began growing a garden partly to save money, calculating the cost of soil can quickly make us doubt whether this gardening hobby is a worthwhile investment after all.

I'm a pretty frugal gal so I understand the concerns. I've grown a portion of my garden in raised beds from my first season with a very small budget. Yet I've also seen how the health of my soil directly correlates the health of my plants and thus the quality and quantity of harvest.

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What is a gardener to do?

The easy answer is to pony up the cash! Garden experts will urge you to not to cut corners in the area of soil. It makes sense, and I don't disagree.

But I daresay those gardening experts aren't working with the limited budget of the everyday home gardener. And they're probably not gardening for the primary purpose of *saving money* by growing their own food.

That's why I felt it necessary to offer soil *options* to the everyday gardener. From working on a next-to-nothing budget to having a little extra cushion to invest in your garden soil, in this guide, you'll learn the specific options you have available.



Just keep in mind that your garden soil *is* an investment, so invest in as high of quality soil as you can afford. But if you're like I was and you're bootstrapping your first garden, start small with what you have and amend as you can. Whatever you do, don't let the cost of soil stop you from starting.

In the next sections, we're going to explore options for what I call *The Penny Pincher*, *The Average Joe*, and *The Investor*. Before we dive in, here are some things to keep in mind:

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- Costs here are *estimates* based on my local area and online research. You'll need to price your local options.
  - Costs here are to fill a 4' x 8' x 10" raised bed.
  - When buying soil and compost in bulk, you'll usually be buying in a quantity that will fill more than one bed.
  - When purchasing any type of soil or compost, look past what meets the eye. Look at ingredients/certifications listed on the bag or ask questions about the source when buying in bulk. More than one gardener has inadvertently purchased tainted soil, only to meet great disappointment, financial loss, and labor required to correct the problems.

With all that in mind, let's get started!

## Penny Pincher

If you're starting with a limited budget, you will want to use what you have available, and for most people, that will mean starting with *native soil*.



But why would you use native soil if you are building raised beds? Wouldn't it be better just to plant in the ground?

Not necessarily. Even if you fill your raised bed with 100% native soil, the lack of stepping on your ground alone will eliminate compaction, resulting in a healthier soil. Plus, you can amend your soil with nutrients in a more frugal way when those amendments can be concentrated in your garden

space, as opposed to spreading it over an in-ground bed, pathways and all.

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Where do you find native soil? For me, we had extra mounded dirt on our property that we transported to our garden beds. If the location where your raised bed isn't level, you can use the soil you scrape when you level the ground to backfill the beds. Or you could find an elevated part of your property and harvest soil from there.

Before filling your raised beds, remove any rocks from the soil. You may also find clumps of weeds in native soil. I usually separate those and place them at the bottom of my raised beds. They will compost at the bottom, contributing to long-term soil fertility.

Of course, I recommend you amend your native soil as much as your budget allows. Organic compost is always my top recommendation, as it will help both natively clay and sandy soil.

Here are four recommendations for soil if you're pinching pennies. Remember, all calculations are based on a 4' x 8' raised bed that is ten inches high. [To calculate your raised bed's soil volume needs, click here.](#)

### *Option 1: 100% Native Soil (Free)*

If you have access to native soil you must assess its quality before deciding to fill your beds with it alone. The best way to do this is via a [soil test](#), but if you do not have time or funds for this, you will need to sharpen your powers of observation.



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If you squeeze the soil when wet, does it crumble or stay together? A soil with heavy clay content usually contains ample natural nutrients, but plants will struggle to access them. A soil with sandy content will struggle to retain both nutrients and water. And a soil full of rocks will not create a fertile space for plants' roots to access the nutrients they need.

As long as your native soil doesn't swing to these extremes (or isn't highly acidic or alkaline), chances are you can grow in it. Just take steps during the season and over the years to add organic matter (starting with mulch made from organic materials), and you will begin to notice its composition improving over time.

### *Option 2: Native Soil + Homemade Compost (Free)*



If you haven't begun composting even at a basic level, [now is the time to do so](#). Your kitchen scraps of banana peels, onion skins, coffee grounds, and crushed eggshells added to everyday materials like discarded paper can form the very basic elements of compost.

Whether you designate a pile in a part of the yard or drill holes in a rubber tote, you can begin making your own compost for free. Once those materials have broken down into a substance not resembling its original materials, you are

ready to begin adding this organic matter and nutrition to your native soil.

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### Option 3: Native Soil + Topsoil (\$2 - \$54)

In my most frugal raised bed soil I combined my native soil with bags of topsoil I purchased at a local garden center. This topsoil added a touch of aeration to my clay soil without costing much. For less than \$2 per 40-lb. bag, you can add as many bags to your raised bed soil as you can afford.

Each 40-lb. bag will give you one cubic *foot* of soil. A standard 4' x 8' x 10" raised bed holds one cubic *yard*, or 27 cubic feet, of soil. At the maximum, you could purchase 27 bags of topsoil for your raised bed for an approximate cost of \$54.

However, I don't recommend filling your bed with topsoil alone. You will need organic, nutrient-rich material to supplement it, and many native soils like mine do provide this. If you chose to fill your bed with 60% topsoil and 40% native soil, you'd spend around \$34 per bed.

If you have access to a pick-up truck or trailer, obtaining topsoil from a local landscaping company would give you an even more frugal option. At around \$25 per cubic yard, you could purchase enough topsoil to supplement native soil in a few raised beds.



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## Option 4: Native Soil + Topsoil + Compost (Free to \$65)

My top recommendation for the penny-pinching home gardener is to fill your raised beds with a combination of native soil, topsoil, and compost, for a blend that fits your budget the best.

Let's look at two different options for filling your 4' x 8' x 10" raised bed with 40% native soil, 40% topsoil, and 20% compost.

### **Native Soil + *Bagged* Topsoil + *Bagged* Compost: up to \$65**

As we already discussed, bagged topsoil will cost about \$2 per bag. To fill a 4' x 8' x 10" bed with 40% bagged topsoil, you'd need 11 bags for a total of \$22.



That was the easy part. Now let's talk about bagged compost. I have used the cheap bagged cow manure compost for sale at my local garden center, and it has *never* benefited my garden. In fact, I've found my plants actually suffered when I used it. I have my own theories on this. Perhaps it's the high salt content of the bagged manure or maybe residual herbicides from the hay fed to the cows. Either way, I don't recommend it.

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Instead, I recommend organic bagged compost, which can set you back about \$9 per cubic foot, or \$45 for 5 bags. Yep, I know it's not cheap, but, buy what you can afford. Any good-quality compost is better than none.

### **Native Soil + *Bulk* Topsoil + *Bulk* Compost: Free to \$20**

If you have access to a pick-up truck or trailer, purchasing topsoil and compost in bulk will save you money.



First, check with your local municipality. Many will give away their compost for free as long as you shovel it yourself. Mine does, but they also will deliver a load to my truck or trailer for around \$11 per load.



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Before putting this compost on your garden, I recommend ensuring it is of high quality and isn't tainted with herbicides or other harmful chemicals. Ask questions on the source of the compost first. Then, go and physically look at the compost. You want it to be black and crumbly and smell sweet. For an extra measure of "being on the safe side," ask for a sample and perform a simple [bioassay test](#).

If a free or cheap form of compost isn't available to you, check with your local landscaping companies. Ask them their method for composting as well.



A cubic yard of compost should cost around \$50, and as mentioned above, a cubic yard of topsoil costs around \$25. Dividing this into what it would cost to fill a 4' x 8' x 10" raised bed with 40% native soil, 40% topsoil, and 20% compost at these prices, each bed would cost you about \$20. (Native soil: free; Topsoil: \$11, Compost: \$9)

As you can see, if you're a Penny Pincher, you have several options available to you depending on the availability of native soil and the ability to purchase in bulk. But what if you have a little more to spend on your raised bed soil? These next two sections will give you more selection options even more.

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## Average Joe

Let's say you have some funds to work with, and you'd like to use those funds to invest in the quality of your soil. But you don't want to go too crazy. Or maybe instead of just one raised bed, you're building multiple, so you need to keep the costs down.

### *Option 1: Native Soil + Compost (\$25 to \$120)*

If you have some native soil to work with, you might want to skip the filler topsoil and go directly with this raised bed soil combination from [Mother Earth News](#), which consists of half native soil and half compost.

If you're able to obtain high quality compost in bulk, this will prove a frugal option at just \$25 per bed, but if you have to purchase compost in bags, the price tag could rise to over \$120.



### *Option 2: Topsoil + Compost (\$40-\$150)*

Without native soil, you can purchase topsoil to make up the 50/50 blend of soil and compost. If you're able to purchase in bulk, you're looking at about \$15 for topsoil and \$25 for compost per bed. But if you have to purchase bags, plan on around \$30 for topsoil and \$120 for compost.

Clearly, in both of these options, sourcing a bulk supplier is your best route.

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## The Investor

In the soil options for the Penny Pincher and the Average Joe, we've talked about basic blends of native soil, topsoil, and compost. And these blends should make up the foundation of any raised bed's soil.



But there's a reason why expert gardeners recommend adding other amendments to this foundation. These amendments add both essential nutrients, important microbes, and beneficial soil structure. Your garden can benefit from even a small dose of these additions.

Some you might even find for free, like chicken manure if you have a small flock of chickens. Or worm castings if you create your own vermicomposting bin. Or shredded leaves if you have deciduous trees on your property, or access to them.

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But the average home gardener may not have access to these amendments, and when you purchase them, this raises the price tag on your garden soil. If you can swing it, do it. Nothing will give you healthier plants than a blend of top-quality soil.

Let's look at two popular options for the home gardener: Joe Lamp'l's "Perfect Soil Recipe" and Mel's Mix.

### *Option 1: Topsoil + Compost + Organic Amendments (\$55 - \$125)*

If you have ever seen photos of Joe Lamp'l's garden farm, I'm sure his raised beds have made you swoon. Just one look at them make you know he's doing something right. He's the first to tell you that if you spend money anywhere in your garden, invest in your soil.



Joe goes into detail on each ingredient in his "Perfect Soil Recipe" [in this post](#) (which I highly recommend you reading), but as a review, his recommendations include 50% topsoil and 30% compost with the remaining 20% coming from a blend of organic materials. What organic materials? He suggests sources like worm

castings, mineralized soil blend (such as azomite), shredded leaves, mushroom compost, ground bark, and properly sourced manure.

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If you are able to buy your topsoil and compost in bulk, and spend about \$25 on additional organic materials, you will spend about \$55 on this mixture in a 4' x 8' x 10" raised bed. But if you have to purchase bagged topsoil and compost, along with the \$25 in additional organic materials, plan on paying around \$125.

Obviously you could spend much more than \$25 in these additional organic materials, depending on which ones you choose. You could also do what I did and rely solely on your own poultry manure as your extra ingredient.



### *Option 2: Vermiculite + Peat Moss + Compost (\$100 - \$160)*

Mel's Mix is a popular soil blend made popular by the pioneer of the Square Foot Gardening method, Mel Bartholomew. Some people criticize this mix as nothing more than glorified potting soil, but others testify to its results.

In Mel's Mix you use an equal blend of vermiculite, peat moss, and compost.

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The big question mark on cost here is the vermiculite. In order to get enough to fill a raised bed, you'll have to find a bulk source. (The small bags would add up to over \$400 in vermiculite alone!) If you're able to get vermiculite for [\\$25 for four cubic feet](#), you would spend about \$50 on vermiculite in your 4' x 8' raised bed. But if you have a local Home Depot and want to pick it up there, you'll pay [\\$20 for two cubic feet](#), or around \$80 for the bed.

Then you have peat moss, which is more readily available and will cost around \$30. For a more sustainable solution, look into coco coir, but it will cost significantly more.

With a bulk supplier of compost a good deal on vermiculite, soil for your raised bed would cost around \$100, but if you have to purchase bagged compost, look at the cost of soil for your bed to well exceed \$150.

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As you can see, the options for your raised bed soil are endless! And the price you'll pay will depend on many factors such as whether you can purchase in bulk, what inputs you already have available, and the quality of the compost you end up choosing.

My hope is that these options will get you started thinking about how you can fill your raised beds within a price range you can afford.

*Happy Gardening!*

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379 Redmond Road, Pottsville, AR 72858

