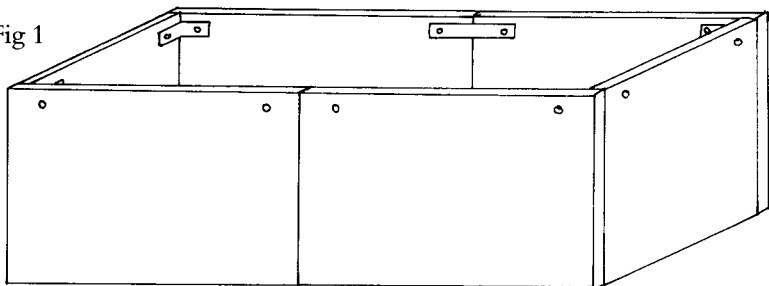

Raised Beds

IAN AND MARGARET YOUNG

Some years ago we were fortunate to be able to increase the size of our garden. In planning our garden extension, we were keen to include some raised beds. These were to be quite close to the house, where we were laying a terrace of 90 x 60cm concrete paving slabs. As we had no source of natural stone suitable, we decided to build the beds from the same slabs. The slabs were to be set on their long edge to form a bed two slabs long, by one wide, giving a bed 180 x 90cm, x 60cm high.

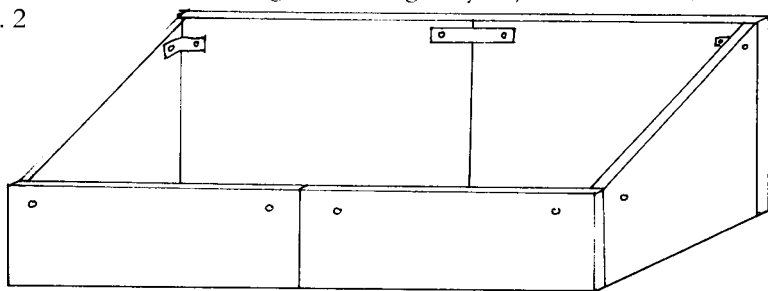
Holes were drilled in the slabs, near the corners, using a masonry drill, allowing a steel angle bracket to be bolted on. The two slabs forming the long edge were also drilled and a straight strap of steel was bolted on the inside to secure them. (Fig. 1). The bottom edge of the bed was held in place by being set into the surrounding slabs of the terrace. If such a bed were to be free-standing, the slabs would be drilled and bracketed at the foot as well, for stability.

Fig 1



We have also used this system to build a plunge-frame by using two 90 x 60cm slabs for the back; two 90 x 30cm slabs for the front; and cutting two 90 x 60cm slabs diagonally, with a stone cutting saw, to form the sides. (Fig. 2). (If you prefer, the local builders' merchant who supplies the slabs should be able to arrange the cutting for you.)

Fig. 2



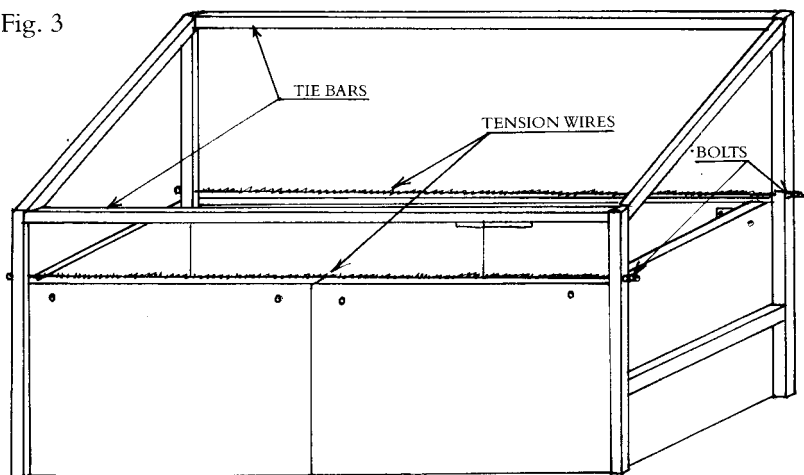
Our raised beds and frames were 180 x 90cm but they could be built to any multiple of the slabs.

With about 20cm of sand in the base of the frame and dutch-light type frames made to cover the top, we have found this frame successful for growing a large range of plants.

Now back to those raised beds. As our garden is free-draining, no special care had to be taken to ensure that the beds did not become baths! Nonetheless, we took the opportunity to dispose of any rubble and broken pots in the bottom of the beds. Next in were old stacked turves and the contents of our compost heaps, to provide a rich moisture retentive layer of humus. The final 30cm were a mix of equal parts of peat; shredded, composted turves; and ¼" granite chips. After planting up the beds, a 6-9cm dressing of the granite chips was applied. (Now our own shredded and composted hedge trimmings and prunings are replacing most of the peat content in our more recent projects.)

We have devised a system to cover the raised beds which is very quick and easy to erect. (Fig. 3). We use this method to cover two of our four slab beds from late September to April. The system consists of two sloping wooden gable frames that fit the short ends of the bed; these are 120cm high at the back and 90cm at the front. Wooden tie bars hold these together at the top, while tension wires, positioned just over 60cm from the ground and tightened by a bolt, anchor the structure firmly to the bed. Corrugated plastic or glass fibre sheeting, secured to a wooden frame, fits into the top between the gable end where it is held in place by steel pins through the tie bars.

Fig. 3



These covers stop the worst of the winter rain from saturating the resting plants, but wind-blown rain and snow can cover the beds and provide sufficient winter moisture. The covers also allow the early flowering plants, some of which can be in flower in late January, some protection from the worst of the frosts.

Some settlement occurs in the beds but this allows us to top-dress them annually, usually in late autumn, with more granite chips. These are worked well in around the plants. Some plants have to be eased up to avoid burying them with the gravel mulch: others, such as *Raoulia australis*, like to be completely buried for the winter, coming through with renewed vigour in the spring. We have noticed this plant steadily moving across one of the covered beds in a north westerly direction. Is it looking for fresh soil? We dug out and replaced the soil in its original site to see if we can encourage it to reverse its migration before it overtakes a *Saxifraga oppositifolia*. The saxifraga also likes a gravel mulch and does well in the raised bed where we can enjoy its very early flowers at a more convenient height. We find this plant does much better if it is dead-headed to prevent seeding.

Androsaces also enjoy life in the raised beds, especially the *A. sarmentosa* forms which are rapidly taking over half a bed. They have such good foliage, with a magnificent display of flowers in the spring, then in autumn *Cyclamen hederifolium* comes through their rosettes, so we are content to let them spread, rescuing any plants they are overgrowing. Another plant that has spread is *Leucogenes leontopodium*. Fully 1m across, it has swamped many a less vigorous plant in its path, but when it rewards us with over 500 long-lasting flowers in early summer (Fig. 61, p223) and such magnificent silver foliage all year, who could resist it? We thought we might plant *Leucogenes grandiceps* in the other half of the bed to make a North Island and South Island, New Zealand bed!

Anchusa caespitosa grows strongly, obviously appreciating the deep root run. To those who insist it should be grown "in the character of its native habitat" this plant, forming a dome some 20cm high by about 60cm across, with its spiky foliage liberally sprinkled with the brilliant blue flowers, must seem exceedingly vulgar! It seems that we are quite unable to grow it "in character", but we're really enjoying our fat monstrosity!

In early July we take cuttings from this *Anchusa caespitosa*, reducing it to about half its size, though about six weeks later, you would not know any difference. These cuttings, grown on and repotted regularly, make good show plants the following spring.

A *Lewisia tweedyi* seedling, planted in the corner of a bed in July, flowered from the following February right through to August. It was a very good large flowered form, and seed and cuttings were taken from it before we decided that we must try to move it because its large leaves were damaging

some nearby cushion plants. Alas, it did not survive the move, but its offspring thrive. It was this experience that persuaded us to take a more relaxed attitude to the question of large specimen plants taking more than their fair share of space. We now try to rescue the smaller plants in good time, or failing that, we just think ourselves fortunate to have so many happy plants!

Dionysia aretioides has survived in one of the covered beds for two years now, flowering in spring, though it does not do as well as those in the alpine house. The dwarf aquilegias, *A. saximontana* and *A. bertolonii*, do well and it is a pleasure to be able to study them at close quarters. We have just raised enough seedlings of *A. jonesii* to try a few out in one of these beds and hope for flowers.

Many of the dwarf narcissus, such as *N. bulbocodioides*, *N. romieuxii* and *N. scaberulus*, are happy in the beds, where the covers allow their early flowers to be enjoyed without wintry weather spoiling them as soon as they open.

Rhodohypoxis baurii thrives in these beds, increasing well and flowering cheerily from May until the first frosts in late September or early October. Recent plantings of townsendias, eriogonums, physarias and other American species have been very encouraging. We are tempted to make a new bed especially for the Rocky Mountain alpine.

Azorella trifurcata, planted close to the side, hugs the edge of the slab and is now making its way down the outside. *Hypericum reptans* trails over another edge, providing flowers from July until winter sets in. *Rhododendron keleticum* 'Rock's Form' covers itself with its large, rich mauve-pink, flat-faced flowers and is happily intertwining with *Celmisia bellidioides* whose white daisy flowers contrast well (Fig. 62, p223). Both obviously enjoy the conditions provided by life in an uncovered raised bed.

The beds receive an autumn feed of bone meal and a spring feed of Vitax Q4. This, with the top dressing of chips, is all the maintenance required, apart from the occasional removal of plants in imminent danger of swamping! We have found very little difficulty with weeds, which are in any case very easily removed. Basically, the only watering we have to do is to ensure that new plantings do not dry out before their roots become established. We enthusiastically recommend this method of building raised beds, but should you wish to try them for yourself, we urge you not to make our mistake: be sure to make any paths between the beds wide enough to allow the passage of a loaded wheel-barrow, or, like us, you will have to make some rather convoluted journeys to bypass them!