Potting Bench

Build a rustic outdoor table that's great for more than just gardening

BY DAN CARY

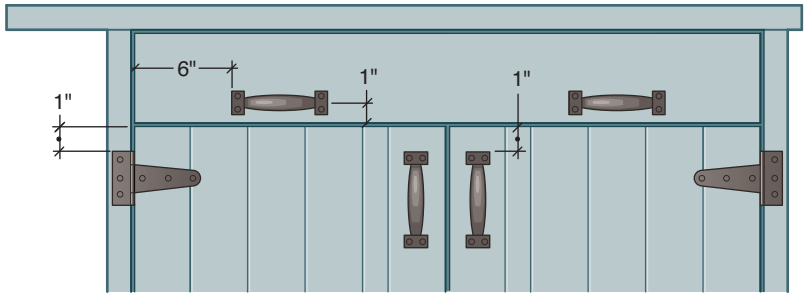
Working at a comfortable height makes any task easier. So why settle for crouching on the ground when you work on a project in the backyard? What you need is an outdoor workbench — a role this nontraditional potting bench is built to serve.

The design for this project started out to be a typical potting bench, but as I consulted various gardening enthusiasts, I ended up with a piece that looks nothing like a traditional model. It's lower than most benches, making it a more comfortable working height for most gardeners. (You can make the legs longer if you prefer.) There's also an attached lower work surface for heavy bags of soil or large

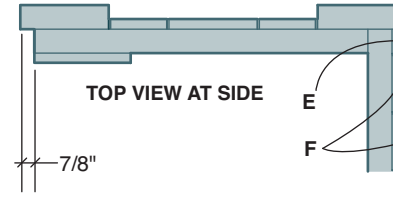
Several gardeners contributed to the design of this non-traditional potting bench. It features a pullout tray for easy tool access and a side table for large or heavy objects.

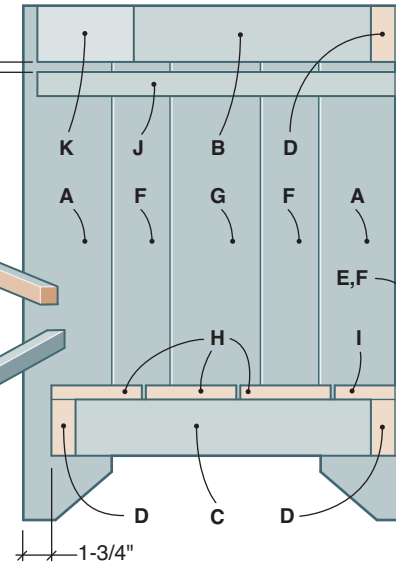
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN CARY AND TRACY WALSH

POTTING BENCH

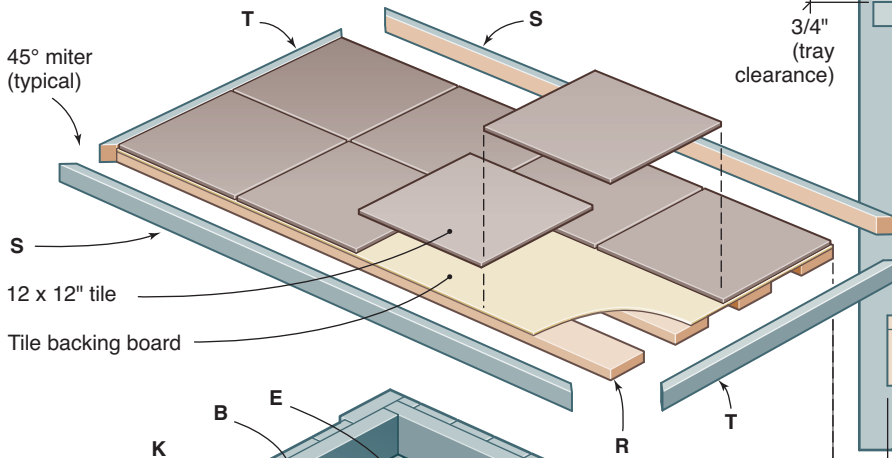


PARTIAL FRONT VIEW





SIDE ASSEMBLY



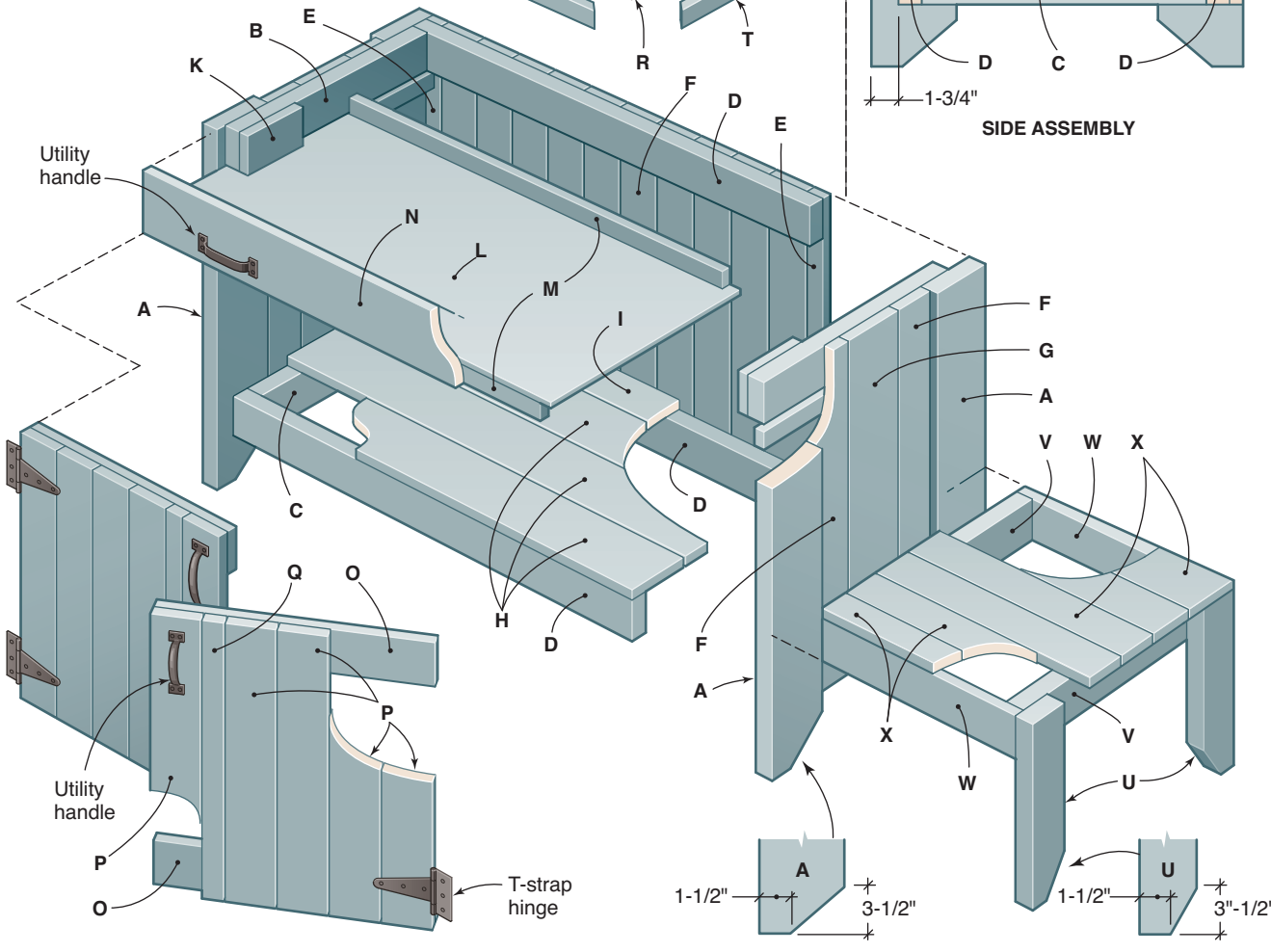


ILLUSTRATION BY GABRIEL GRAPHICS

planting containers that you don't want to hoist up to the main table. The enclosed cabinet is undivided for maximum storage capacity and versatility. And a pullout tray provides easy access and protected storage for hand tools.

Because this bench will likely reside in the backyard and be seen by visitors, I wanted it to be more attractive than a common workbench. The rustic country style makes it a decorative accessory. In fact, it would make a nice kitchen island if you replaced the pullout tray with a real drawer and raised the height to 36 in.

You'll be surprised by how simple this bench is to build; even a gardener with no woodworking experience can make it. The only tools you'll need are a saw to cut the parts to length, a drill/driver and a hammer. I used a miter saw and pneumatic nail gun to make construction even easier, but a handsaw and hammer will get the job done.

MATERIALS AND CUTTING LIST

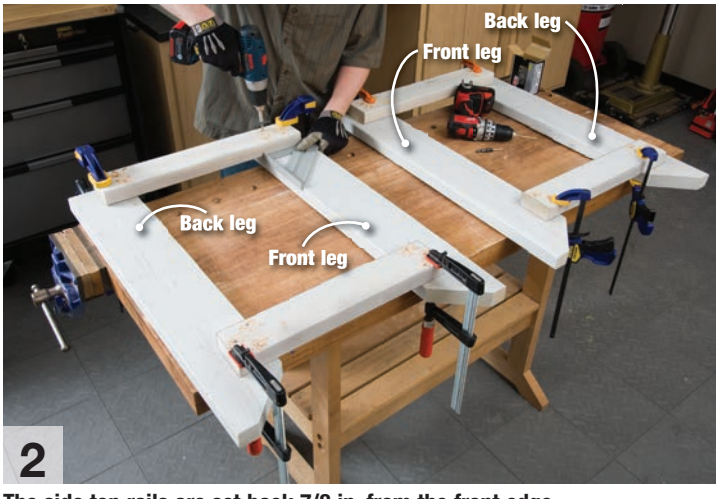
KEY	NO.	DESCRIPTION	SIZE
A	4	Bench legs	1-1/2 x 5-1/2 x 32 in.
B	2	Side top rails	1-1/2 x 3-1/2 x 20-3/4 in.
C	2	Side bottom rails	1-1/2 x 3-1/2 x 18-3/8 in.
D	3	Front and back rails	1-1/2 x 3-1/2 x 40 in.
E	2	Narrow siding boards	7/8 x 1-1/2 x 28 in.
F	14	Standard siding boards	7/8 x 3-1/2 x 28 in.
G	2	Wide siding boards	7/8 x 5-1/2 x 28 in.
H	3	Wide floor boards	7/8 x 5-1/2 x 40 in.
I	1	Narrow floor board	7/8 x 3-1/2 x 40 in.
J	2	Tray supports	7/8 x 1-1/2 x 22-1/4 in.
K	2	Tray stops	7/8 x 3-1/2 x 6 in.
L	1	Tray base (plywood)	1/2 x 20-1/2 x 39-1/2 in.
M	2	Tray front and back rails	7/8 x 1-1/2 x 37 in.
N	1	Tray front	7/8 x 5-1/2 x 39-3/4 in.
O	4	Door cross-battens	7/8 x 3-1/2 x 19-3/4 in.
P	10	Door wide boards	7/8 x 3-1/2 x 22 in.
Q	2	Door narrow boards	7/8 x 1-1/2 x 22 in.
R	4	Top supports	7/8 x 3-1/2 x 47-3/4 in.
S	2	Top front and back edges	7/8 x 1-1/2 x 50* in.
T	2	Top side edges	7/8 x 1-1/2 x 27* in.
U	2	Shelf legs	1-1/2 x 3-1/2 x 15 in.
V	2	Shelf cross supports	1-1/2 x 3-1/2 x 21 in.
W	2	Shelf side rails	7/8 x 3-1/2 x 17-1/4 in.
X	6	Shelf boards	7/8 x 3-1/2 x 19 in.

*Length depends on actual tile size
All parts cedar except as noted

SHOPPING LIST

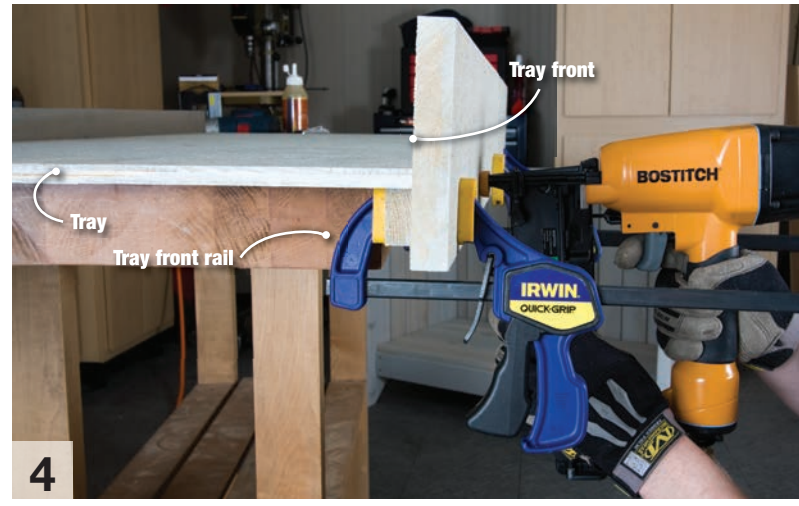
- 7/8 x 1-1/2 x 8-ft. cedar (5)
- 7/8 x 3-1/2 x 8-ft. cedar (12)
- 7/8 x 5-1/2 x 8-ft. cedar (3)
- 2x4 x 8-ft. cedar (4)
- 2x6 x 8-ft. cedar (2)
- 1/2 x 2 x 4-ft. plywood (1)
- Tile backing board (1)
- 12 x 12 in. tiles (8)
- Construction adhesive
- Exterior caulk
- Exterior-rated glue
- 1-1/4-in. exterior-rated screws
- 1-5/8-in. exterior-rated screws
- 2-1/2-in. exterior-rated screws
- 1-1/2-in. finish nails
- Black T-strap hinges (2 pairs)
- Black utility handles (4)

Mark the taper cut lines on the bench legs. Use a miter saw, jigsaw or handsaw to cut the tapers.



The side top rails are set back 7/8 in. from the front edge of the front legs. The side bottom rails are set back 3-1/4 in. from the front edge of the front legs. Both rails are 2-3/8 in. from the back edge of the back legs.

Attach the siding boards to the rails, spacing the boards roughly 1/4 in. apart. Adjust the position of the boards to keep them evenly spaced.



Attach the tray front to the tray front rail with glue and finish nails. Then attach the handles with 1-5/8-in. screws.

Position the hinges so that the bottom/top edge of the vertical plate is 1 in. from the bottom/top edge of the doors.

Cut and stain the parts

All of the parts are stock widths, so you only have to cut the boards to length. Set up a stop block for consistency when cutting multiple parts that are the same length. Label the end of each part, and stack the parts in groups. (Wait to cut the top support boards because their length depends on the length of the countertop.) Mark and cut the tapers on each of the bench and shelf legs (photo 1, p. 13).

Cedar is naturally rot-resistant, but applying exterior stain will further extend its longevity. If left unstained, the color of the cedar will gradually change to a weathered gray. I chose to speed up the process by applying a gray semitransparent deck and siding stain, making an instant "antique."

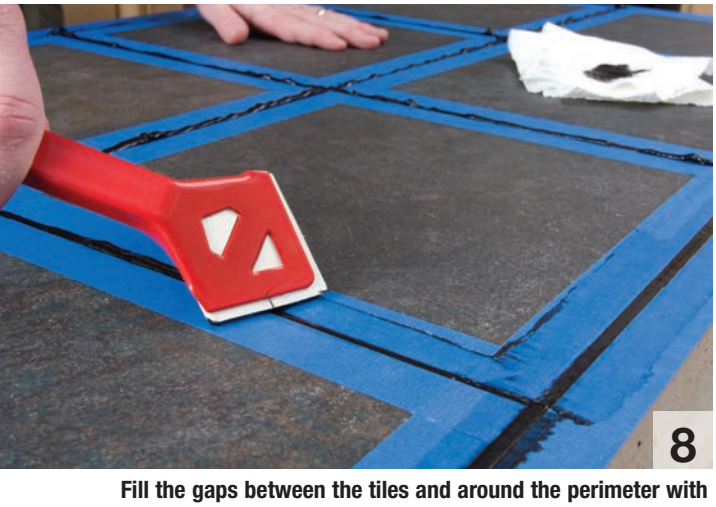
Assemble the bench

Once the stain has dried (at least 24 hours), you can assemble the bench. First assemble the structural frame. Attach the bench legs to the side rails with 2-1/2-in. deck screws (photo 2). Drill pilot holes before driving each screw. Then attach the front rail and back rails to the legs and side rails with 2-1/2-in. deck screws.

Next, attach the siding boards to the side and back rails. I combined the various siding board widths so

Attach the side-shelf frame to the bench legs with 2-1/2-in. screws, keeping the top of the shelf level.

Apply construction adhesive to the back of each tile and place the tile on the backer board, leaving roughly even spaces from the edge of the backer board and between the tiles.



Fill the gaps between the tiles and around the perimeter with silicone caulk. Screed off the excess caulk with a caulk-smoothing tool or plastic putty knife.

that I wouldn't have to rip any boards. You can fasten the boards with finish nails or 1/4-in.-wide crown staples. Staples offer better holding strength, but finish nails are less conspicuous. I chose to use 1-1/2-in. nails and applied a small amount of exterior-rated glue to improve their holding strength (photo 3).

Attach the floor boards to the bottom rails with 1-5/8-in. deck screws. Position the 1x4 board in the back, evenly space the remaining 1x6 boards roughly 1/4 in. apart, and leave about 1/4 in. setback from the front edge of the rail.

The plywood base of the pullout tray is the only part that's not made from exterior-rated material. Because it is located inside the bench, it is protected from direct or long-term contact with water or UV light. To improve its longevity, I applied the same exterior stain/sealer that I used on the cedar boards. Attach the tray front and back rails to the tray base with 1-5/8-in. deck screws. Then attach the tray front to the tray front rail with exterior-rated glue and 1-1/2-in. finish nails or staples (photo 4, p. 14).

Next, attach the tray supports to the legs. Position the supports 3/4 in. below the bottom edge of the side top rails. Slide the tray onto the tray supports and attach the tray stops to the side top side rails with 1-5/8-in. deck screws. The tray stops keep the tray from pulling out too far and falling out of the cabinet.

The doors feature a basic board-and-batten design similar to barn doors. They are made from six boards that are held together by two cross-battens or braces. Large board-and-batten barn doors typically feature a diagonal brace for additional reinforcement, but that's not necessary on doors of this size. Attach the battens to the vertical boards with 1-1/4-in. screws. Use a square to be sure the battens and boards are perpendicular. Mount the T-strap hinge's horizontal plate on the door face and the vertical plate on the front legs (photo 5).

Build the side-shelf frame and attach it to whichever side of the bench you prefer (photo 6, above, left). Attach the shelf boards with 1-5/8-in. deck screws.

Build the top

You can choose from several materials for the top. The simplest and least expensive is a 2 x 4-ft. piece of exterior plywood. The downside of using plywood is that it may splinter with use, and it isn't the most attractive option.

Another alternative is to use deck boards, but the gaps between the boards will allow dirt and water to fall into the cabinet. Galvanized or stainless steel countertops are often used on greenhouse worktables, and though I love the appearance and function of both materials, both were a little too expensive and not readily available.

I chose to use porcelain tile because it is durable, easy to install, inexpensive and available in a wide variety of styles. The tiles are attached to a piece of backer board that is fastened to the top support boards.

The size of the backer board depends on the size of the

tiles you choose. The best size for this project is roughly 12 x 12 in., but the exact dimensions may vary slightly. Measure the tiles and add the width of two tiles plus the width of the spaces between the tiles to determine the width of the backer board. Add the width of four tiles plus spaces to determine the length of the backer board.

I used HardiBacker 1/4-in. Cement Board, which you cut by scoring with a utility knife and snapping along the score line, just as you would drywall board. After cutting the backer board to size, cut the top supports the same length as the backer board. Position the front and back top supports so that the outside edges are the same distance apart as the width of the backer board; then space the rest of the top supports evenly in between. Attach the top supports to the side top rails and the back rails with 2-in. deck screws. Attach the backer board to the top supports with 1-1/4-in. deck screws.

Tile and tile backer board are typically secured using thinset mortar and tile grout, but in this case I attached the tiles to the backer board with polyurethane construction adhesive and filled the gaps between the tiles with exterior-rated silicone caulk. This made construction very simple, and both adhesives are durable and resistant to changes in temperature and moisture.

Attach the tiles to the backer board (photo 7). Next, miter cut the top edge pieces to fit around the backer board and support boards. Attach the edge pieces to the support boards with exterior-rated glue and 1-1/2-in. finish nails.

Finally, mask off the tile surfaces with tape and fill the gaps with caulk (photo 8). Screed off the excess caulk and remove the masking tape.

This bench can be placed in your yard with one of its sides against a wall or fence, or it can stand in an open area so that you can work from all sides. All you have to do to clean it is brush it off or hose it down and it's ready for another project. ◆