

GARDEN **PROJECTS**

Potting Bench

Big workspace and plenty of storage

BY BILL MYLES



Photo, this page: Thomas Allen

In the heart of every gardener is the desire for a potting bench—one that can be used year-round, though there will be times when it stands still and orderly, its surface swept and tidy, with tools, pots, labels, and soil all in their places.

As a carpenter, I have come across a few potting benches—some bluntly utilitarian, some detailed like fine furniture. For this bench, which isn't difficult to build, the original design concept came during the give-and-take between carpenter and client.

My client wanted a potting bench for her garden for seed sowing, transplanting, and potting up cuttings. She wanted the bench to be 6 ft. long, about 2 ft. deep, and 32 in. tall. She requested organizing shelves on top and a hatch with hardware cloth, providing a potting surface that allows excess soil to fall through to a bin on the shelf below.

Deciding on materials for the potting bench was easy. I chose redwood because it's readily available on the West Coast and because it naturally resists rot. When choosing wood, look for pieces that are relatively straight, dry, and knot-free. If redwood is unavailable, consider cedar, another good weather-resistant wood.

To assemble the bench, I used 2½-in.-long ceramic-coated deck screws. Redwood is fairly soft, so drilling pilot holes for screws isn't necessary unless you are within 1½ in. of the end of a board. In this case, drill ¼-in.-dia. pilot holes to keep the wood from splitting. For a rustic look, drive the screws flush with the surface and leave them exposed. But for an elegant look, countersink the screws so that the heads are ¼ in. to ⅜ in. below the surface (a ⅜-in.-dia. Forstner bit works best for this). The resulting holes can be filled with plugs, giving your bench a finished look and making the top easy to clean.

Making the frames

The upper frame consists of a 66-in.-long 2x4 rear apron, a 69-in.-long 2x4 front apron, and four 20½-in.-long 2x4 stretchers. Using two screws at each connection, attach the outer stretchers to the aprons, offsetting the front apron by 1½ in. at each end. The inner stretchers determine the location of the hatch. I left 18 in. between these two pieces and set them 6 in. to 8 in. from one side or the other.

The lower frame is similar to the top, except that the front and back rails are each 66 in. long and the three stretchers are each 19 in. long. Attach the outer stretchers to the ends of the rails with screws, placing

What you'll need

MATERIALS

Redwood or cedar lumber:

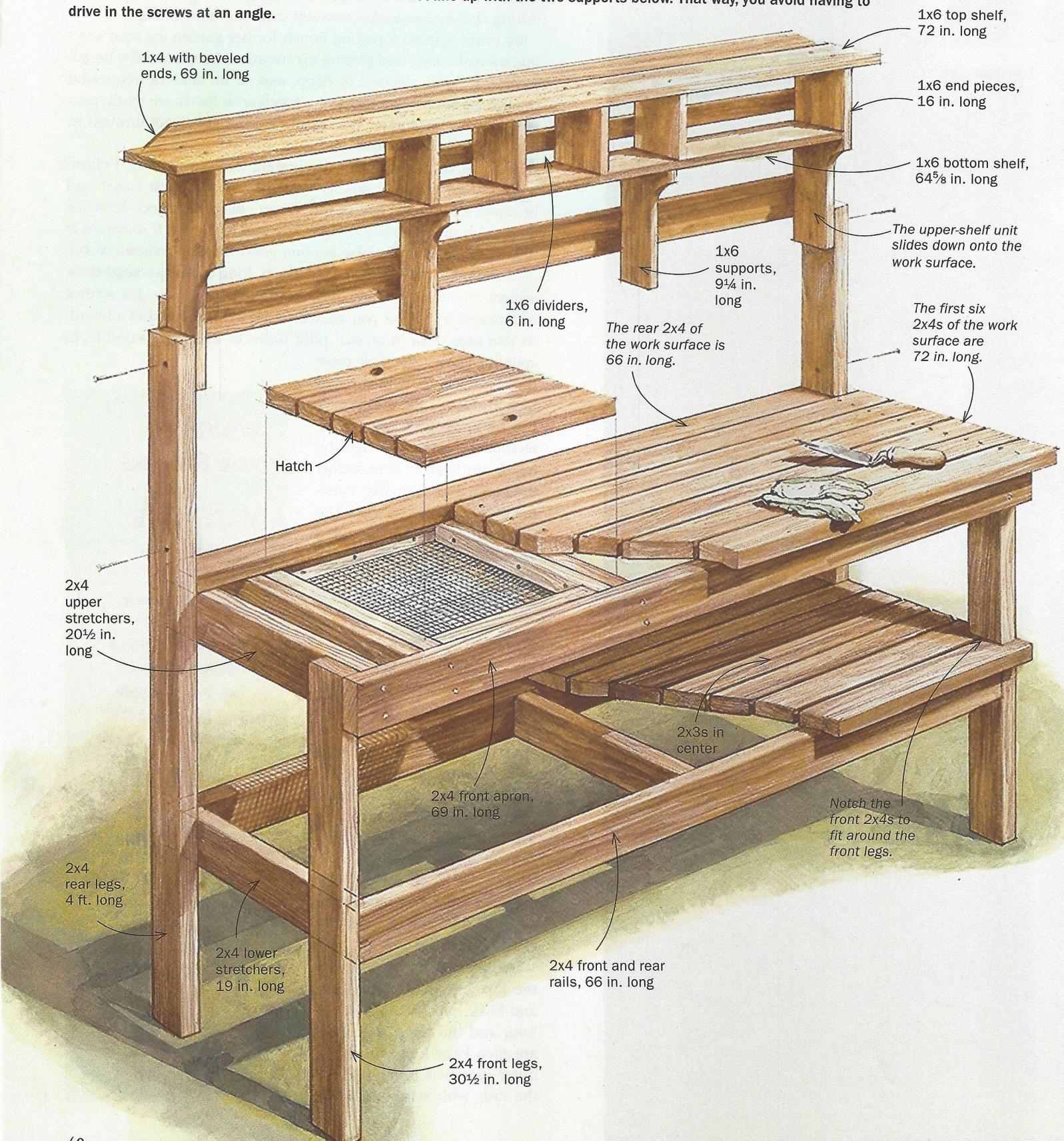
- Eleven 12-ft.-long 2x4s
- One 12-ft.-long 2x3
- One 8-ft.-long 1x6
- Two 6-ft.-long 1x6s
- Two 8-ft.-long 2x2s
- Three 6-ft.-long 1x4s

HARDWARE

- One 2-ft.-long by 2-ft.-wide piece of ½-in. hardware cloth
- One hundred 1½-in.-long ceramic-coated deck screws
- Two hundred 2½-in.-long ceramic-coated deck screws

Building the bench

The overall directions for the potting bench are simple, and you can modify the design according to your needs or style. Myles added boards to the back of the top shelves, for example, to keep things from falling off, but that's optional. He also cut the lower supports and ends of the top shelf on an angle to break up all of the straight lines. When assembling the upper-shelf unit, it's best if the four dividers do not line up with the two supports below. That way, you avoid having to drive in the screws at an angle.



the front-rail ends flush with the outer side of the stretchers. Place the third stretcher in the center.

Cut two 2x4s 30½ in. long for the front legs and two 2x4s 4 ft. long for the back legs. Mark the front legs 15 in. from the bottom. This is where the top of the lower frame will line up. Mark the back legs at 15 in. and at 30½ in. from the bottom. The first mark indicates the top of the lower frame, and the second mark indicates the top of the upper frame.

Once the legs have been cut and the top and bottom frames constructed, they can be connected. The easiest way to attach the legs is to stand the two frames on their backs, 10 to 11 in. apart. Line up the frames to the marks on the back legs. Use three 2½-in.-long screws at each connection.

For the front legs, line up the lower frame with the 15-in. mark and align the top edge of the upper frame with the top of the leg. Drive screws from the outside of the legs into the frames. The bench can now be tipped up onto its legs with the bottom shelf and work surface screwed on.

Assembling the bench

The lower-shelf surface consists of one 2x4 66 in. long, four 2x4s 69 in. long, and two 2x3s 69 in. long. Using two screws at each end, install the 66-in.-long piece first, between the back legs and flush with the back edge of the frame. Next, install the two front 2x4s. The first board should overhang the frame by 1½ in., so you will need to cut notches 1½ in. deep and 2 in. long from each end



Overhang the edge of the lower shelf. Cut notches from each end of the front two boards to fit around the front legs.



Evenly space the upper- and lower-shelf boards. Use shims as spacers and to keep the boards in place while driving in the deck screws.

Add the hatch



Add a screen. Affix the hardware cloth to the sides of the interior stretchers. The 20½-in.-long cleats hold the hardware cloth in place and support the hatch.

to fit around the front legs (see top photo, previous page). The second board has notches 1½ in. deep and 1½ in. long cut from each end. After these boards have been screwed in, place and space evenly the remaining four boards on the frame and line up the ends. Use cedar shims as spacers between adjoining boards to adjust the gaps and hold the boards in place while you drive in the screws (see bottom photo, previous page).

The work-surface boards, one 66 in. long and six 72 in. long, are installed in the same manner as the lower-shelf boards, except that you will not need to notch around the front legs. Install the 66-in.-long piece first between the back legs, followed by the front piece, which will overhang the front and sides by 1½ in.

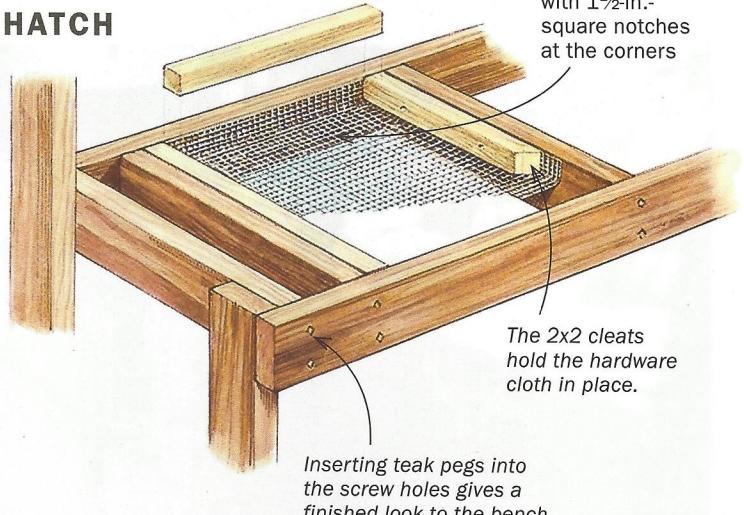
Cutting the hatch

To cut the hatch, place a straightedge on top of the bench. Sight down through the cracks to find the inside edges of the stretchers that will frame the hatch opening. Draw lines for both sides of the opening. Use a jigsaw to make the cuts. The gap between the boards should be wide enough to insert the blade to start the cut. If it's not, drill a hole next to the line to insert the blade.

To assemble the hatch, take the cutout pieces and lay them on top of the bench, upside down. Make sure to match the spacing of these pieces with the spacing of the work-surface pieces. Use two pieces of 15-in.-long 2x2s as battens to hold the hatch together. Place the 2x2s 2 in. from the ends of the 2x4s, and screw them together. With a 1-in.-dia. Forstner bit, drill two holes in the hatch to serve as handles.

Use tin snips to cut a piece of hardware cloth 21 in. long by 23½ in. wide. Cut 1½-in.-square notches from each corner, and fold up the sides, using a block of wood as a straightedge. Fit the hardware cloth snugly into the hole. Cut two 2x2 cleats 20¼ in.

HATCH



Inserting teak pegs into the screw holes gives a finished look to the bench.

UNDERSIDE OF HATCH

