

STRAW BALE GARDENING

August, 2014

SOURCES:

<http://milwaukee.uwex.edu/files/2012/06/StrawBaleUWV.pdf>

<http://strawbalegardens.com>

ITEMS NEEDED: **Straw Bales** **High Nitrogen Fertilizer (46-0-0)** **Garden Fertilizer (10-10-10)**

The first step in straw bale gardening is to put your bales where they will stay in the garden. Once you begin watering and planting you will not be able to move the bales. Be sure to purchase bales that are straw from small grains and not alfalfa hay. Look for bales that have synthetic twine because the natural twine will break down, the bale will pop open and you will have a straw pile garden. Newspaper or cardboard can be placed on the ground under the bales to prevent grass and weeds from growing around the bales. Do not use plastic because it will prevent the water from draining away from the bales.

Place the bales where they will get 6-8 hours of sunlight and have access to water. They can be put end to end, in a horseshoe or in any other design that fits your space. The strings of the bales go on the sides and soaker hose can be placed on top to be an efficient irrigation system. There should be a "cut" side and a "folded" side. Try to place the cut side up for an easier process. Plan where your vegetables will go so trellises can be added for vertical gardening that will not shade smaller plants.

Once the garden has been designed it is time to condition the bales. The water and fertilizer will begin a natural decomposition process. The bales will get hot so do not plant until the process is complete.

To start the process, here is a recipe that works well.

Day 1: Sprinkle each bale with ½ cup high nitrogen fertilizer. Water the bales thoroughly until water runs out the bottom.

Day 2: Water the bales thoroughly. Using warm water speeds up the process such as from rain barrel.



Day 3: Sprinkle each bale with ½ cup high nitrogen fertilizer. Water the bales thoroughly.

Day 4: Water the bales thoroughly.

Day 5: Sprinkle each bale with fertilizer and water well into bales.

Day 6: Water the bales thoroughly with warm water only.

Days 7-9: Cut back to ¼ cup high nitrogen fertilizer per bale per day; continue to water well with warm water.

Day 10: Apply one cup 10-10-10 general garden fertilizer, continue to keep bales damp.

Days 12-18: Stick your hand into the bales to see if they are still warm. If they have cooled to less than your body heat, you may safely begin planting after all danger of frost has passed.

You can grow almost anything in a straw bale but some plants are easier than others. Carrots, onions, potatoes and corn may be a challenge.

Using a trowel make a hole in the straw and place the seedling up to the first leaf then cover the roots with a little sterile planting mix. Fill in the straw. If you need a bigger hole remove a little straw. Spacing is the same as conventional gardening. If you want to plant seeds just place a 1-2 inch layer of sterile planting mix on the top of the bale, tamp it down flat and plant seeds into the soil. When planting tomatoes be sure to stake them well or they will flop over.



The seedlings can be planted once the bales have cooled.

Straw bale gardens don't contain any soil so nutrition must be provided by feeding with a liquid fertilizer once every other week when plants are small and then every week as plants begin to grow. Water the bales as needed.

Besides vegetables, strawberries absolutely love to grow in straw bales. Annual flowers can be added to the sides to dress up your bales or the whole bale can be used to make a splash of color in the garden.



Remember to fertilize weekly. . .



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