

Straw Bale Gardening

By Susan Camp

A few years ago, my husband and I discovered straw bale gardening while watching a popular cooking show on television. The chef, who also is a farmer, demonstrated how to plant annual herbs in straw bales, which then can be used as compost at the end of the growing season. We were intrigued, but never got around to trying it until this spring. Now we have several healthy, cheerful strawberry plants thriving in two straw bales near the kitchen door.

The idea of straw bale gardening appears simplistic: dig a few holes in a straw bale, put in some potting medium, plant the annuals and water them. Some preparatory work is involved, however, beginning with the decision to use straw or hay bales. Straw bales are considered the better choice, because they contain fewer weed and grain seeds, but hay bales produce a better growing environment; precisely because of the presence of seeds, hay bales are rich in nitrogen. Straw bales are composed primarily of carbon and will require fertilizer to prevent nutrient depletion. Leaves of plants that lack sufficient nitrogen will turn yellow. Purpling of leaves is a symptom of phosphorous deficiency, while brown leaf margins indicate low potassium.

Three to four weeks before planting, place the bales on top of several layers of newspaper to deter weed growth. One article suggested placing the bales on hardware screen to prevent rodents from setting up housekeeping. The area should receive four to eight hours of sunlight each day. Choose the spot carefully; once the bales are wet, they will be too heavy to move. Wet the bales and keep them moist during the conditioning period. Washington State University Extension Fact Sheet FS109E provides specific directions for conditioning by adding a high nitrogen source to start the “cooking” process. During this time, the temperature inside the bales can reach 105° F, according to the article “Straw Bale Gardening Gives Gardeners a Head Start”, written by a Penn State Extension Master Gardener and published in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. By the end of the conditioning period, the internal temperature should stabilize at about 85° F.

Annual herbs, vegetable, and flowers will grow in straw bales, either from seed or young plants. Basil, cilantro/coriander, and summer savory are good herb choices. Cucumbers, peppers, squash, and zucchini are easy to grow in bales. Plant summer annual flowers in the sides of bales for color. Train tomato plants to a stake or place the bales in front of a trellis for support. Root vegetables like carrots and onions are difficult to establish, and corn becomes top-heavy.

Place plants in holes dug into the bales and filled with planting mix and aged compost. Garden soil contains weed seeds and should not be used. Sow seeds directly onto a one to two inch layer of sterile potting mix with added slow-release fertilizer.

Weekly fertilizing is necessary because of the low nutrient content of the straw. The biggest challenge is keeping the straw bales wet during the hot summer months. A soaker hose placed under the bales before conditioning is a good option. You can create a simple drip irrigation

system by poking small holes in the lid of a two liter soda bottle or gallon milk container. Fill the bottle with water and “plant” it lid side down in the bale. You can add liquid organic fertilizer to the bottle, which will need refilling every few days.

At the end of the growing season, dismantle the bales and recycle them on the compost pile or use the straw as winter mulch. Intact bales sometimes can be used a second year.

Straw bale gardening presents an inexpensive method of making a garden with a minimum of effort and time, other than the conditioning period. It is a great system of raised-bed gardening for people with back or hip problems, and a fun first garden for children.

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