



Straw Bale Gardening

the biodegradable alternative to raised beds

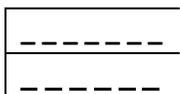
Ideal for gardens in areas of contaminated soil or on patios

I) Supplies

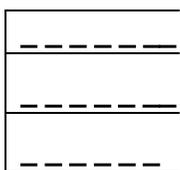
- ◆ bales of straw (the yellow colored, cut stems only of oats; do not use the pale green “hay” bales as they contain a mixture of grasses, legumes and many seed heads which will be sprout as weeds in your garden). Straw is used for beddings for animals while hay is used as a feed.
- ◆ a source of nitrogen (store-bought 30-0-0 granulated fertilizer, or blood meal or chicken manure)
- ◆ soil/compost mix
- ◆ seeds/seedlings

II) Configuration of Bales

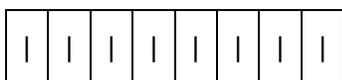
- ◆ You can have 1 bale, a few, or many depending on your desired garden size. Place each bale so that the cords/twine holding the bales together are horizontal, parallel with the ground, with the cut side of the straw up.
- ◆ If more than 1, place them side by side in as long a row as you want, either in a double row, with both the short ends and the long sides touching like this:



or a triple row:



or singly in a row like this, with the long sides touching:



The main requirement is that the center of your bales is within an arm's reach of where you stand (depending on your arm's length, normally 18" to 24").

- ◆ You can also surround any size garden space with straw bales placed end to end like this  This will keep rabbits out of the enclosed space. This idea is particularly beautiful when the tops of the bales are planted in flowers with the vegetables/herbs planted inside the enclosed area.
- ◆ It is recommended that if you use only 1 bale, that you 'diaper' it with a large plastic bag to help hold the water in. Simply set the bale, on edge as described, right on top of a plastic bag larger than the bale, pull up each bag side and tuck the ends into the cord that wraps around the bale. If you have several bales together, they help hold the water in for their neighbors.

III) Bale Preparation

- ◆ Days 1 through 3: Water the bales thoroughly and keep them damp.
- ◆ Days 4 through 9: Each day, mix ¼ cup of the high nitrogen granulated fertilizer with 1 gallon of water, per bale, and 1 gallon of water and slowly pour over the bale saturating it. Or sprinkle ½ cup blood meal or 1 cup of chicken manure over the top of each bale, and slowly pour the 1 gallon of water over it and washing the meal/manure into the bale.
- ◆ Day 10 – no more nitrogen but continue to keep the bales damp.
- ◆ Day 11 – when the bale no longer feels 'hot' (stick your hand down into the stems to see if it is less than body temperature),

IV) Bale Planting

- ◆ Take a trowel and forcefully stab down into the top of the bale 20 or 30 times to help break up the top few inches of oat stems.
- ◆ Add 2 inches of soil/compost mix and again, stab the bale top forcefully with a trowel to help move the soil/compost down into the bale.
- ◆ Top-dress the bale with 2 more inches of the mix and water well.
- ◆ For seedlings, make a crack in the mix/bale with your trowel, place the transplant's roots down into the crack and fill the hole with more mix. For seeds, simply plant them right into the mix at the appropriate depth and sprinkle more mix on top. Again, water gently.
- ◆ Note: Make sure to water the bales frequently in the beginning. They must be kept damp. Once they begin to decompose they will hold more water and you will need to water less often. Be careful not to wash the layer of soil away.

Suggestions for Plants

- ◆ It is not recommended that you plant root vegetables (potatoes, beets, carrots, etc.) in the straw bale until the second year when the interior of the bale has softened and decomposed much more. After 2 years, the bale will have almost completely decomposed and you will then happily throw it on your other garden beds as a really healthy mulch and start over with new bales.
- ◆ Space out your vegetables, herbs and flowers in a straw bale much as you would for a regular garden. One bale will hold 1 indeterminate or 2 determinate tomato plants, or 3 pepper/okra/broccoli/eggplants, or 5 or 6 kale/swiss chard/bush bean plants, or a row of 12 to 15 pea plants up a small trellis, or 2 bush cucumbers, etc.
- ◆ A single bale makes a terrific herb garden or a continuous supply of greens or an eye-catching display of trailing flowers!