

Ask a Master Gardener

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Straw Bale Gardening

It's not too early to start planning for the next vegetable garden. I love my easy and convenient potage garden. It is small, with raised beds that are close to the kitchen where I use the bounty for cooking. I supplement my two raised beds with large pots for veggies and herbs and, this year, my experimental straw bale planters.

I talked to my gardener friends and got mixed reviews about their successes and failures with straw bales. Since I had two leftover bales from a grass seeding project and some extra tomato and pepper plants, I decided to give the method a try. It certainly is a thrifty, versatile way to garden because the materials are cheap and you can place bales wherever you want (no soil required), and they will eventually turn into compost to feed a future garden.

Straw bales can be made from wheat, oat, or alfalfa. Because straw is harvested after the grain and chaff have been removed, it doesn't include a lot of seed material. Hay, on the other hand, contains lots of seeds, which will sprout and (in addition to making your bed look like a chia pet) could invade your veggie crops. Pine straw isn't the best choice, as the waterproof pine needles shed water too well for this application. I used what I had and removed the unwanted sprouts as they came up.

Once that bale gets wet, it will get heavy so make sure it's where you want it to stay. If you pick a grassy area, put several layers of newspaper or a piece of cardboard underneath to keep grass and weeds from growing up into the bale. Or, if you want to give your bale a more polished, upscale look, consider building a frame. I took some black landscape cloth and wrapped it around the bales.

My first step was to choose a sunny spot. I turned the bales so the strings holding the bale together were on the sides. Make sure the cut side of the straw is up, as the hollow straws will allow moisture to penetrate better.

Conditioning the bale is the most important step. Planting too soon before the bale is ready probably causes the most failures. As soon as moisture hits the bale, it will start to decompose, and the inside will heat right up – definitely not a good thing for plants. This process usually takes around 10 to 14 days. For the first 3 days, simply water the bale thoroughly so it stays damp. For the next 6 days, in addition to watering the bale, use a liquid fertilizer to add nitrogen to speed the decomposition. Another option is to sprinkle a cup of ammonium sulfate on the top of the bale on days 4 through 6, then a half-cup on days 7 through 9. Each time, water in the fertilizer. As the bale goes through the conditioning, the internal temperature may rise to 120 degrees or higher. I would periodically stick my hand down into the bales to see how hot they felt.

On day 10, return to simply watering the bale, and continue doing that until the temperature inside the bale starts to reflect the temperature outside. You can use a compost or meat

thermometer to keep tabs; you'll see the temperature start to rise after the first day or two, spike about midway through the process, then start to come back down. Once it reaches ambient temperature, the bale is ready to be planted.

You can grow just about anything in a bale that you can in the ground — with a few exceptions. Tall plants like indeterminate tomatoes and corn get too tall and heavy. If you wish to grow tomatoes, stick with bush or other determinate varieties. Running plants can be harder to grow in a bale.

When you are ready to plant, remove straw to form a hole that is as deep as root ball of your plant. If you are planting a tomato you will want to go deeper. Place the plant in the hole, add some quality potting soil around it for extra nutrients and stability, then fill the rest of the hole in with some of the straw you removed. Water well.

Because your plants will receive less nutrition from the bale than they would from soil, it's important to fertilize them every week or two. You'll also want to make sure not to let the bale dry out. You can create your garden out of as many straw bales as you want, arranged in whatever shape or style you like and placed anywhere they can get lots of sun. You can use spaces like driveways, patios and other unused parts of your garden, without even having to bend over too far to pick all those great vegetables, herbs and flowers.

For more information or answers to any of your gardening questions, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.

