

Straw bale gardening ideal when soil is tough



Create a planting bed for seeds by covering the straw bale with a 1- to 2-inch layer of planting mix.
Photo/Melinda Myers LLC

By Melinda Myers

Add productive garden space and raise your planting bed with straw bale gardening. This technique allows gardeners to create raised bed gardens on a patio, lawn or any area with poor compacted soil. Straw bale gardening has been around for centuries, but thanks to Joel Karsten's book "Straw Bale Gardens" it has gained new popularity.

All that is needed are a few straw bales, fertilizer, a bit of compost and time to condition, plant and water the garden.

Be sure to purchase straw bales made from alfalfa, wheat, oats, rye or other cereal grain that have less weed seeds than hay. Start a few weeks before the designated planting date.

Place the bales in their permanent location with the cut sides up and twine parallel to the ground. Once you start the condition process, the bales will be very heavy and hard to

move. When the bales are in place you are ready to start the conditioning process. This is done to start the inside of the straw bales composting, so they'll support plant growth.

On day one, spread fertilizer over the top of the bale. Use a $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of a complete garden fertilizer or 3 cups of an organic fertilizer. Then completely moisten the bale. The organic fertilizers feed the microorganisms that help decompose the straw into a nutrient rich planting medium.

Thoroughly soak the bale everyday. On days three and five you will add more fertilizer at the same rate used on day one.

Days seven through nine use half the rate used on day one. This would be one-quarter cup of a complete garden fertilizer or $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of an organic fertilizer. Thoroughly water the bale each time.

On day 10 you will add one cup of 10-10-10 or 3 cups of an organic fertilizer rich in phosphorous and potassium. This completes the conditioning process.

Bales treated with a complete fertilizer should be ready to plant. You may need to wait a few more days when using an organic fertilizer. The inside of the bale should be the temperature of warm bath water or cooler for planting. If it is hotter than this, wait for the bale to cool a bit before you plant.

Use a trowel to pry open a hole in the bale. Place the plant in the hole and cover the roots with potting mix or compost.

Create a planting bed for seeds by covering the bale with a 1- to 2-inch thick layer of planting mix. Follow the planting directions on the back of the seed packet.

Regular watering is critical for success with this method. Soaker hoses or drip irrigation make this an easier task. You can also use gallon milk jugs with holes in the bottom or

inverted 2-liter soda bottles placed near the base of each plant to provide water where it is needed.

Give your straw bale garden a nutrient boost about once a month or as needed throughout the growing season.

Follow these steps and you'll be well on your way to growing a productive straw bale garden to enjoy throughout the season.

Gardening expert Melinda Myers has more than 30 years of horticulture experience and has written more than 20 gardening books, including Small Space Gardening and the Midwest Gardener's Handbook. She hosts The Great Courses "How to Grow Anything: Food Gardening For Everyone" DVD set and the nationally syndicated Melinda's Garden Moment TV and radio segments. Myers is a columnist and contributing editor for Birds & Blooms magazine and spokesperson for Milorganite.