

Straw bale Gardening



Straw bales can function as raised beds and are useful on a variety of surfaces including concrete patios, pavers and poor-quality soil. Bales are ready to plant after being conditioned. Here's what you need to know to have a straw bale garden this summer.

Materials

- 2' by 3' bale of straw (not hay)
- Water supply
- Nitrogen-rich fertilizer
- Growing media
- Plants/seeds

Conditioning

Conditioning is the process of preparing the bale for planting. Though the straw bale will decompose naturally on its own, conditioning will expedite the process and prepare a healthy, rich spot for plant roots to develop.

Place the bale on the narrow, long end so the twine isn't in contact with the ground in a location where it can remain throughout the season. Once conditioning begins it will be difficult to move the bale without falling apart.

- Days 1-3: Water and keep the bale wet. It will heat up as decomposition occurs.
- Days 4-6: Sprinkle 1 cup nitrogen-rich fertilizer on top of each bale and water it in to promote decomposition. (Organic or synthetic options will work.)
- Days 7-9: Reduce fertilizer amount to ½ cup daily and water it.
- Day 10: Water the bale without fertilizer and monitor bale temperature. When the temperature drops below 100 degrees F the bale is ready to plant. (Or wait until the bale is no longer hot to the touch.)

Planting

Annuals are a good option for straw bale gardens. Due to decomposition, the bale will not likely hold up for multiple years making it difficult to grow perennials. See below for a guideline of how many vegetables can be planted per straw bale.

- *Pocket Method* – best for transplanting
Make a hole several inches deep into the top of the bale for each plant. Fill the hole with growing media and plant as usual.



Permaculture

- *Flat Bed Method* – works well for direct seed
Cover the top of the bale with 3-4 inches of growing media and plant seeds to the appropriate depth.

In general, each straw bale can support the following number of plants. This is not an all-inclusive list, but rather a guide.

- 2 cantaloupes
- 3-4 cucumbers
- 3-5 peppers
- 2 squash
- 2 tomatoes (determinate)

Maintenance

Straw bales can dry out quickly. Monitor daily and water as needed. A drip system or soaker hose is an efficient way to add supplemental water to straw bale gardens. Apply a water-soluble, balanced fertilizer weekly.

At the end of the growing season, the decomposing bale can be spread in the garden and turned under the following spring.

Cynthia Domenghini, Horticulture Extension Specialist



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