



GARDENING BY THE BALE

Benefits of Gardening by the Bale:

- Gardening by the bale allows all of us to grow something just about anywhere a straw bale will fit. Have terrible soil, or need to let the garden sit fallow for a year? Then Garden by the Bale!
- They are raised above ground level, making it easier on the back and great for gardeners with limited mobility, raised and easily accessible on all sides. They can be mobile, but once they're wet, they are difficult to move.
- Once wet, they do hold moisture which can be a real plus to help reduce watering time and they're great at holding nutrients as well.
- Worms love them.
- Straw bales can help protect plants from soil borne diseases.
- They are inexpensive.
- They're instant, and besides watering and feeding, somewhat foolproof.
- There's no digging.
- Very little weeding.
- When you're finished using them, just till them into the soil, use them as mulch for the next series of bales, or use them in the compost pile.
- A conversation piece, who else do you know that grows a garden using bales of straw?

Getting Started:

Here's what you'll need to get started:-Bales of straw- Any type will work, but wheat seems to be the best. Avoid Hay bales, they are too weedy and decompose too quickly. Try to find wire or nylon tied bales, which will last longer, and find bales that are tightly baled. If string tied, you will need to add wire or nylon twine around them to help hold them together. - Stakes placed at the ends of the bales will help hold them together, as well as staking plants that need staking. Soil-less potting mix, quality grade bagged potting soil, compost, compost / topsoil/ rotted manure mix, etc.-Fertilizers (Ammonium nitrate was once recommended but is hard to find. Urea, granular garden fertilizer (5-10-10, 10-10-10, etc.) or water soluble types such as Miracle Gro or Peters. For organic gardening, use Espoma's Garden food, Seaweed, Liquid Kelp, etc.-Plants and or seeds can be grown in bales. (Just about anything can be grown in straw bales, with exception of most root crops or really tall plants such as corn.) You will need a full sun location and access to water.

Select a site that will receive at least 6 hours of sunlight each day (more is better), and has good surface drainage.-Position your bales in rows, squares, different shapes and forms, side by side, create a maze, stacked on top of each other, etc., and try to position them end to end as they will help hold each other together. You may lay the bales flat on the ground (with the strings touching the ground) or on their side so the strings runs around the bale and not in contact with the soil. Either way will work. Obviously if the strings touch the ground, they will rot faster. That's why wire or nylon tied bales are preferred. If you intend to grow greens (spinach, lettuce, etc.) bales on their sides work best.

Make sure your bales are placed where you want them, as once they're wet they are very hard to move! Preparing Your 'Fresh' Bales: [Follow this process for preparing new, dry, fresh bales of straw. Letting your bales weather for 2 months (put them in place before they weather!) will give you a jump start on this process and you can skip down to Day 10, just before you're ready to start planting. During the process, wheat seeds may begin to grow. Remove them as needed. Your straw bales should last about 2 years.

Days 1-4: Water your bales thoroughly and keep them wet. If the bales are placed in the winter months Mother Nature will take care of this for you. This starts the bale 'cooking'.

Days 4-6*: Apply approximately ½ cup of ammonium nitrate or urea or choice of fertilizers to the top of each bale and water in well. Do this each day or *over a longer period if you are starting in the winter months (3 applications total). This gets those microbes active in the bales and increases the 'cooking' process.

Days 7-9: Apply ¼ cup of ammonium nitrate or above fertilizer substitutes per bale and water in well (cooking process is slowing down.)

Day 10: Apply 1 cup of 10-10-10 or something similar per bale and water in well.

After Day 12*: From this point on (*or spring planting time) your bales are ready for planting. As an optional addition to the bales, many straw bale gardeners will apply a 1-3 inch layer of composted material (bagged soil-less mix, compost, topsoil compost mix, etc.) on top of the bales, especially if growing greens such as spinach and lettuce, or if planting flowers or veggies from seed.

Planting:

For planting transplants, use a hand trowel to pull apart the bale just enough to insert , 4" wide pockets of potting soil, plant in the pockets as you would planting in the ground. After planting water well. Water and fertilize your bales as needed, depending on the types of plants growing in the bales. Feel free to use water soluble fertilizers when you water, or granular garden fertilizers sprinkled on top of the bales. Espoma's organic fertilizers provide a steady source of food whether you are growing organic or not.

What can you grow? Besides *not* growing most root crops and possibly taller growing crops like corn (which may fall over), gardening by the bale is pretty wide open. Tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, cole crops, salad greens, peas, onions, cucumbers, squash, melons, herbs, beans all do nicely growing in straw bales. Plant on the same basic spacing as you would in the ground – maximum of 2 tomatoes per bale, 2-4 peppers per bale, 6-8 cucumber vines per bale, 3 squash per bale, etc. Want to add some excitement to your bales? Try adding a few annuals or perennials, especially vining ones, to cover up some of the bale corners and add a little extra color to your straw bale garden. You may try total annual or perennial gardening by the bale as well!

Talk about a great conversation piece!

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