
UNH Cooperative Extension Info Line Question of the Week

Straw Bale Garden



Q. Why would I want a straw bale garden?

A Gardening with straw bales is like container gardening except that the container itself is compostable and provides the nutrients necessary for plant growth. With almost no work straw bales easily grow lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash or zucchini and beans. Straw bale gardens are less expensive than raised beds, can be placed anywhere that gets sun 8 hours a day, can be tended from a chair for those with physical disabilities and work well for those who have poor or contaminated soil.

All you need for your garden are straw bales (not hay), newspaper to go underneath the bales for weed control, fertilizer for conditioning, some potting soil and a trowel for making planting holes. A soaker hose on a timer placed on top will come in handy since the hardest task is to remember to water daily.

To make the garden, place the bales with the cut end of the straw facing up. A couple of weeks before planting begin the composting process by watering the bales daily. To speed the process, on days 3 to 7 sprinkle ½ cup urea (46-0-0) over the surface. Cut this back to ¼ cup on days 7 to 9. A good organic alternative to urea is blood meal. Keep the bales damp on succeeding days. They are ready to plant when you can stick your hand into the middle of the bale and it has cooled to body temperature.

To plant seedlings, simply make a hole, tuck the plant in and fill the extra space with a little potting soil. To plant seeds, place a small layer of potting mix on top of the bale and plant the seeds according to packet directions. As the plants grow the straw will continue to break down and supply nutrients, but it's a good idea to supplement with a liquid fertilizer every few weeks.

Got questions? UNH Cooperative Extension Education Center's Info Line offers practical help finding answers for your lawn and garden questions. Call toll free at 1-877-398-4769, M-F, 9:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m., or e-mail us at answers@unh.edu