

Straw Bale Gardening

No soil, no room, no tools? No problem! All you need is a bale of hay or straw and you have a mini-garden. The bale can be placed (cut side up!) on a driveway, in an alley, or in among your yard, wherever it will get 6-8 hours of sunlight a day. Season the bale by watering it daily for 10-14 days (you can add a nitrogen source to speed up the process) and then you're ready to plant directly into the bale. Add a little garden soil around transplants to shelter the roots or to the top of the bale, if planting seeds, then just keep the bale watered and watch it grow! Choose your plants according to how much sun your bale will get: for lots of hot sun, choose sun lovers like tomatoes, okra, cucumbers, and peppers; in shadier locations, try strawberries, beets, peas, or leafy vegetables. Mix in some herbs and flowers, which make wonderful companions for your veggies.

Your straw bale garden can also be portable if placed in a shallow wagon (if drainage is possible) or on a pallet with wheels. You can then drag your garden to wherever the sun is optimal in your yard throughout the day. *[Note: Watered bales are quite heavy, so think about that if planning to move it around!]*

Straw bale gardens are economical in cost and size, acting as both container and soil! Be sure to ask the supplier if the bales are organic or at least that the hay has not been sprayed with an herbicide. Bales are only about 14" wide, 18" tall, and 40" long, so if all you have is a small space, it is a perfect raised bed. And if your back isn't as pliable as it used to be, the height of this bed is very friendly for sitting beside it on a stool to plant or harvest!

As the bales break down, they may need to be staked or supported on the sides beyond the string. If placed on the ground, put tall stakes at either end and run twine between the stakes as supports for tall plants – or, if on a hard surface, place an unused ladder over the bale to support the sides and to act as a trellis for climbing beans or peas. If you plant things that are not very tall, this isn't a problem. The plants will follow its host wherever it leans!

At the end of the growing season, you will have the beginnings of a compost pile! If possible, leave the remains in place for a fall planting or let it continue to breakdown until next spring when you can spread it around your yard. Or add it to your existing compost pile if you are not planting a fall garden. If neither is an option, you can bag it up (or put it in your green bin, if you have one) for the city yard waste pick up to become compost for our city parks. If you have perennials in your bale, transplant them in your yard or into pots or dry herbs for use later in your fall soups or potpourri.

For more information:

Book – *Straw Bale Gardens*, by Joel Karsten

Website – <https://www.uaex.edu/yard-garden/vegetables/straw-bale-gardening.aspx>

Call or email – Travis County Master Gardener Help Desk, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service,
(512) 854-9600 weekdays from 9:00 am – 4:00 pm, travismg@ag.tamu.edu