



Nurture Nature Center, located in Easton, Pennsylvania created an Urban Garden in a small parking area using recycled and found materials to demonstrate low-cost growing techniques for small urban areas. This fact sheet is part of a series that demonstrates ways in which urban gardens can bring nature into their worlds.

Straw Bale Gardening

What is straw bale gardening? Straw bale gardening is container gardening, with the straw bale acting as the container. When the straw inside a tightly packed bale decomposes, it becomes compost—a good growing medium. Keep the bale tied for the entire growing season, and plant into the top surface, not the surfaces with the ties. The outside inch or so on the sides of the bale will dry out from exposure to sun and wind, and become your “container.”

Preparing Your Bale

Bales can rest on any surface. They can even be portable, if placed on wood pallets. Space rows of bales about 3 feet apart, and set up trellising or supports early in the season. These can be posts pounded into the ground at both ends and strung with wires, or wooden supports as shown above.

The process of preparing the bale for planting can be done in about two weeks:

Day 1: Sprinkle $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of high nitrogen fertilizer (about 30-0-0) or 2 cups of organic blood meal (or other organic high N fertilizer) on the planting surface of each bale. Use a hose-end sprayer to push the fertilizer into the bale, and to wet it thoroughly.

Day 2: Water the bale again

Day 3: Repeat Day 1 instruction.

Day 4: Water the bale.

Day 5: Repeat Day 1 instruction.

Day 6: Water the bale. The decomposition process should have started by this time.

Days 7, 8, 9: Add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of fertilizer per bale (or 1 cup blood meal) followed by watering each day.

Day 10: Add a full cup of fertilizer per bale of a balanced fertilizer (10-10-10), or an equivalent amount of organic fertilizer.

Day 12 or after: Plant!

(over)

For more information related to Nurture Nature Center's Urban Garden Project, see <http://nurturenaturecenter.org/garden/>



Scott Stenlund/HVH

Planting Your Bale

When your bales are ready to plant you can do one of two things:

- Dig a hole in the straw, which should be starting to loosen up, and plant a seedling. Add soil mix around each plant.
- Or, create a seedbed on the surface of the straw by mounding up a sterile potting mix on top of the bales (about ½ cubic foot per bale) and sow seeds directly.

Whichever method you use, a loose cover of plastic sheeting will hold the heat in, encouraging germination or protecting tender seedlings on cold nights.

You can also plant in the sides of bales. Push a downward slanting hole into the bale with the handle of a trowel, and slip in a marigold or other annual flower seedling.

Maintaining Your Bale

Fertilize your plants every two to three weeks throughout the season with a liquid fertilizer, such as fish emulsion.

Water regularly! Straw bales dry out very quickly. A good way to water is with a soaker hose, stretched out on top of the bales, straight down the middle. Water only until excess water starts leaking out from the bottom of the bales. If you go on vacation, an inexpensive hose-end timer will allow you to water once or twice a day for the correct amount of time, probably no more than 15 minutes of a low-pressure stream.

Weeds: Some bales will be full of seeds, which will sprout. Pull these grasses out by hand, or cut them with a sharp knife. They will soon give up.

Reference:

Joel Karsten, *Straw Bale Gardens Complete*. Cool Springs Press 2015



After the Harvest!

One of the best things about straw bale gardening is the rotting straw that remains at the end of the season. This weed-free material can be used in many ways: as mulch; to line the bottom third of containers, to mix in soil as an organic amendment. Or, if it has broken down sufficiently, use it as a weed-free medium on the tops of your bales at planting time the following year.

