

February 7, 2018



Straw Bale Gardens
By Dawn Modena
UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

Gardeners love rich, well drained soil that is full of nutrients and organic matter. When we think of the perfect garden soil, we imagine something dark brown with a fluffy texture that has worms cruising through, turning organics into wonderful plant food. But what if you don't have that perfect soil? Many of us have yards full of dense clay, a bunch of rocks, or just a concrete patio. Should we give up on our dreams of growing delicious vegetables and colorful annual flowers? Of course not!

Try a straw bale garden.

Straw breaks down into a nutrient rich, compostable, self-contained planter. This is an inexpensive way to create a garden anywhere there is sunlight and water, even on concrete or asphalt. There is no tilling or digging required and not many weeds to pull. Your garden can be just a couple of straw bales in a small space, or you can have dozens of bales in rows for a large garden. Here is how to get started:

1. Choose a location for your straw bales that gets a minimum of 6 hours of sunlight per day to ensure that your plants will thrive. Your garden also needs a water source close by, as straw bales tend to dry out quickly and daily watering will be required. If your straw bales will be on top of soil, put down landscape fabric first to prevent weeds from growing up through the straw.
2. Be sure to buy straw bales, not hay bales. Hay has dried grasses and seeds and once you start watering it, you are likely to end up with a lot of weeds and grass in your garden. Straw is typically comprised of the stalks of grains such as oats, barley, rye or wheat. Ask for straw that has not been sprayed with herbicides or organic straw for best results. Place the bales with the cut side up and the twine that holds it together going around the sides.

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3. The straw bales need approximately two weeks of conditioning to get the composting process started before planting. Every day for the first week, water the bales thoroughly, soaking them through and add a high nitrogen fertilizer. During the second week, water daily and add fertilizer every other day. During this process, the interior of the bales will heat up, indicating the beginning of the decomposition process.
4. The most effective way to irrigate your straw bale garden is with drip irrigation or a soaker hose. This will keep the straw moist without getting the leaves of the plants wet, which could encourage disease. Set up your irrigation and if the plants will require support, set a post at each end of the rows and run wire or twine between them to create a trellis.
5. When it is time to plant, use a trowel to make a small hole in the top of the bale, insert seedlings and add some planting mix to cover the exposed roots. If you are starting from seeds, just spread 2 to 3 inches of the planting mix on the top of the bale and plant the seeds per the package directions. Once they germinate, their roots will grow down into the composting straw. A wide variety of plants will thrive in straw bales, including summer vegetables, herbs and annual flowers. Plants that are not as well suited for this type of gardening include root vegetables and corn.
6. Water daily and fertilize every one to two weeks during the growing season. Enjoy the bounty of your straw bale garden!
7. Once the growing season is over, you can add the straw bales to your compost pile to help create healthy soil next year, or use it as mulch in areas where you want to keep weeds from growing next spring.

For more information, go to ANR Publication 8559, "Gardening with Straw Bales" at www.anrcatalog.ucanr.edu for a free download.

Join Master Gardener Barry Wold on February 10, from 10:00 am to noon for a timely discussion on straw bale gardening held at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, Placerville. The class is free, parking is \$2. On February 14, from 9:00 am to noon, MG Kit Veerkamp will present on the concept of habitat management with a free class titled "Eco-Gardening/Attracting Pollinators, Beneficial Insects, and other Natural Predators" at the Cameron Park Community Center, Cameron Park.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.

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