



Five Reasons to Try a Straw Bale Garden This Year

By Kathy Ruiz

UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

First there were straw bale houses. Now you can have a straw bale garden. Is there a more versatile field crop byproduct than a bale of straw?

Straw bale gardens are garnering a lot of gardening interest these days. The beauty of the straw bale is that it provides the perfect medium for growing veggies and annual flowers. Joel Karsten's book, "Straw Bale Gardens" can give you all the details on how to start one. This wonderful resource is on the El Dorado County Library new book wish list so hopefully it won't be long before it is available to be checked out.

Here are five reasons why you should try out this special approach to raising vegetables:

1. Eliminate the need to rotate crops. Gardeners are well advised to not plant the same vegetable family in the same planting bed two years in a row. However, with a straw bale bed, there is no issue growing the same vegetable in the same location year after year. At the end of the growing season you will be removing the spent straw bale and relocating it to your compost bin for further decomposition. A fresh bale of hay in the next year's garden will not have any of the lingering pest or disease issues inherent in planting the same crop in a traditional bed or even a raised bed.
2. Get an early start. The straw bale magic is in part due to the composting nature of the straw bale that is initiated during a preparatory conditioning process. Karsten provides step by step directions for doing this. Once conditioned, the straw bales begin to decompose and in doing so produce heat. A trellis system over the bales allows the placement of polyethylene sheeting or row cover. The warm bale coupled with the greenhouse effect of the sheeting, creates a warm protected environment for seedlings to get a good and early start. Karsten claims you can start planting two weeks earlier than you normally would in a traditional or raised bed. Start with crops that take a little cooler weather like kale, broccoli or lettuce.

3. Reduce or eliminate your weeding effort. Karsten assures that if you purchase clean straw bales, you won't have weeds, unless a few seeds blow in from your neighbor's yard. The key is to purchase straw bales and not hay bales. He claims that at most you shouldn't have to spend more than 30 seconds per bale per season. This sounds like nirvana to someone who spends an inordinate amount of time pulling weeds from raised beds.
4. Produce great compost material. At the end of the gardening season, remove the nylon strings that hold the bales together and all other equipment (stakes, soaker hoses, wire and the like) and move the bales to your compost pile. You'll have the added bonus of weed-free organic material that will compost over the winter months for use in other areas of your garden.
5. Nurture your inner scientist. The best thing about gardening is the chance to experiment. Try unusual vegetables, something you've never grown before or a new way to vegetable garden. Check out this new technique by starting small with just a few straw bales. Who knows, maybe it will make you a convert!

Join Master Gardener Zack Dowell at this Saturday's free public education class, "Spring and Summer Vegetables." Learn all about preparing your garden for delicious spring and summer veggies. Plant selection, planting times, site selection and soil preparation will be discussed. Class is on February 15, 2014 from 9 a.m. to noon at the Veteran's Memorial Hall, 130 Placerville Drive, Placerville.

Master Gardeners 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 Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.