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Straw Bale Gardening
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Get a bale of straw. Add sun, water, and fertilizer. Get it cooking. Plant, and watch things grow. This is Straw Bale Gardening (SBG). Maybe it's not quite that simple... However, I have a young friend who had no prior gardening experience and her first attempt was so successful it has become an annual project.

To begin, get some bales of straw, and make sure your SBG location will have water, and at least six hours of direct sunlight. Bales are held together with nylon twine, and the outer layer of straw will serve as the container. As water is added to the bale, the moisture comes in contact with naturally occurring bacteria. The bacteria begin to "eat" at the straw, causing decay. Add some fertilizer, and the bale becomes a productive container garden ready for planting.

The size of your SBG will dictate how many straw bales are needed. The bales can be lined up to form rows. Having ground cover underneath the bales will help prevent weeds, and it will help in moving the bales. Use ground cover cloth or mulch to establish paths at least four feet wide between the garden rows. Paths between the bales help the gardener walk between rows later, for tending plants and harvesting -- and protected pathways help reduce weeds.

The best water source for SBG is soaker hoses, because they directly water plant's roots. Soaker hoses should be laid out prior to planting anything. Soaker hoses also help eliminate plant disease by keeping plant leaves dry.

Next, use an inexpensive lawn fertilizer. Look for one that has at least 20 percent nitrogen and is not slow release. Avoid any fertilizer that contains weed killer, herbicide, or crabgrass preventer. One pound of fertilizer will be needed for each bale.

For two bales of straw, use one cubic foot of potting mix. The mix should be sterile, without weed seeds or actual soil. Next, polyethylene plastic sheeting is necessary for conditioning the

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bales: it's a critical part of preparation. Find rolls that are two to three millimeters in thickness, five feet wide and long enough to cover the entire length of the row of bales. It is helpful to put in posts at either end of the row, which can serve to support plant stakes or to support plant trellis.

Keep the bales covered for approximately ten to twelve days, adding fertilizer and water during the conditioning process. By Day Twelve, the bales are composted enough to be a productive medium for planting and growing.

To start planting, use a hand trowel and dig into the top of the straw bale – that's it! There should be almost no weeds to worry about. Water your bales, preferably early in the morning, whenever the bale feels dry to touch.

Straw bale gardening has many attractions compared to other methods. The bales can be placed anywhere, even on asphalt. Bales can be conventional or 100 percent organic, and extend your growing season, with little to no weeding, soil is not necessary, and SBG produces high yields. Why not? Give straw bale gardening a try this growing season!

Mark your calendars: the annual Master Gardener Spring Plant Sale is May 2, 2015 from 8 am to 3 pm. Vegetables, water-efficient landscape plants, and more at reasonable prices will be available for purchase. The sale will be in the Veterans Memorial Building parking lot, 130 Placerville Drive in Placerville. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at the office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Free gardening classes are being offered in Placerville, at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, and at the Cameron Park Community Center. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to the UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County website at <http://ucanr.edu/edmg> and you can also find us on Facebook.