



## How to establish a straw bale garden

*Adapted with permission from Straw Bale Garden, ©2013 University of New Hampshire Extension.*

Straw bale gardens are inexpensive, require no construction, can be tended from a chair for those with physical disabilities and work well in sites with poor or contaminated soil. While the bales only last a season or two, their temporary nature makes it a great solution for renters or those who may not have fully decided on where to locate their long-term garden. Lettuce, tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, squash or zucchini and beans are just a few examples of suitable crops for straw bale gardens.

### Materials:

- 1 bale of straw (not hay\*)
- newspaper, cardboard or other thick paper to use as a barrier below the straw
- water
- 1lb of blood meal fertilizer or other source of nitrogen, such as urea
- potting mix or finished compost
- chalk (optional)

### Instructions

1. Carefully observe your landscape to determine a site that offers adequate access to water and enough sunlight for the crops you're growing - at least 8 hours of direct sunlight is suggested for most vegetable crops. When assessing light conditions in sites surrounded by deciduous trees, keep in mind that light exposure may vary dramatically when trees begin to leaf out. Avoid placing straw bale directly under the drip edge of your roof.

**Tip:** Our family used this as a fun way of talking about time, writing numbers and discussing what plants need to grow. On a sunny day, we placed rocks around the yard in the morning and committed to checking whether they were in the sun every two hours. With chalk, we'd mark the time on the rock when it was sunny, or turn the rock over and put a frown on it if it happened to be in the shade before 8 hours had passed.

2. Place a layer of cardboard, newspaper or other thick paper in an area slightly larger than the bale itself. This will prevent weeds from growing into the bale from below and also

help minimize grass growth directly beside the bale.

3. Place the straw on top with the cut ends facing upwards (i.e. the string that holds the bale together should be around the front, back and sides of the bale, not the top and bottom of the bale).
4. At least two weeks before you intend to plant, thoroughly water daily to encourage the bale to begin to break down.
5. On days 3-7, sprinkle a ½ cup of blood meal across the top of the bale to speed up the process. Days 8-10, reduce the amount of blood meal to ¼ cup. Keep damp for days 11-14.\*\*
6. Bales are ready to plant when you can stick your hand into the middle and it has cooled to body temperature. To plant seedlings, simply make a hole, tuck the plant in and fill the extra space with a little potting soil. To plant seeds, place a small layer of potting mix on top of the bale and plant the seeds according to packet directions. As the plants grow the straw will continue to break down and supply nutrients, but it's a good idea to supplement with a liquid fertilizer every few weeks.

\* Hay tends to have seeds that will sprout and compete with the plants that you intend to grow.

\*\* This timeline is flexible. Don't worry if you miss a day or two or need to wait a little longer before planting.

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