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## **I Love Straw Bale Gardening**

By Mary Tran

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County

You can plant your garden in the ground. You can also plant in raised beds, a wheelbarrow, or hanging soda bottles. But have you tried straw bale gardening? There are good reasons to give it a try. It is an inexpensive way to expand your garden area. Bales can be placed in small areas and on concrete or asphalt. No digging or soil preparation is needed. Bales are over two feet tall so they makes gardening more accessible. Used bales can be used for composting or winter mulching. And they really work.

With straw bale gardening, new, tightly-bound bales from the feed store are placed in your yard. The straw is conditioned, seedlings are tended, then voila! Food pumps. You can use wheat, oat, or rice straw. Don't use hay because it contains seeds. Locally, bales go for six or seven dollars each.

Arrange the bales so that each gets at least six hours of sunlight daily and you can water them regularly. I set mine next to the existing raised beds and extend a drip line to each. Some people recommend setting bales on the long edge. I find it best to lay them flat so that there is more top surface. It's not necessary to place cardboard or plastic underneath to block weeds; they won't grow up through the bales because they get no sunlight. Also, leaving the contact with the earth allows plants that need deeper roots to just extend into the moist soil under the bale.

The basic procedure is to water the bales every day for a time until they are fully saturated, and on some days also add a high-nitrogen fertilizer. The goal is to begin a decomposition process that warms the straw, making it an ideal medium for plant growth. One method is to soak the bales each day, then on alternate days add one-half cup of fertilizer per bale for three applications, then one-quarter cup for the next two, then a balanced fertilizer one day, then plant. The bales will heat up due to the nitrogen decomposition, then cool enough to be a warm growing medium. Depending on when you start and outside temperatures, this could take two to six weeks.

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Choose plants you like that fit the bales. My favorites are veggies: zucchinis, peppers, tomatoes, eggplants, melons, pumpkins, and herbs. Bales are excellent for melons and squash because they allow these space-hogs lots of room without taking up valuable real estate in other beds. Bales are not a good place for climbers (unless you add structure) because the straw is a less secure anchorage than soil. Also, they aren't a good choice for perennials because they usually only last one season.

To plant seedlings, make a hole, gently insert the seedling, and firm the moist straw around the roots. You can add mulch on top of the bale, then place drip irrigation. To plant seeds directly, open a hole in the straw, fill it with potting soil, insert your seeds, and give them some water.

Feed plants weekly using a water-based balanced fertilizer that contains micronutrients. Alternatively, you can sprinkle a slow-release fertilizer at the time of planting and add more monthly.

Over the growing season, you will find that the straw that was crisp and yellow has composted inside the bales. The used straw makes a good mulch for your year-round plants, or can be added to your compost bin or mixed into soil.

In fact, when you're not gardening in bales, nurturing soil is one of the best things you can do as a gardener. Join Master Gardeners on June 22, 2019, from 9:00 a.m. to noon, at the Government Center Hearing Room, Building C, for a free public education class "Turning Dirt into Gold." Learn what makes soil healthy and how that improves plant growth and disease resistance.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512, or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See [http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration\\_Garden](http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden) for more information and days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see [http://ucanr.edu/mastergardener e-news](http://ucanr.edu/mastergardener-e-news). Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.