



Straw Bale Gardening Workshop

1) What is straw bale gardening?

- a. Quick way to create productive raised garden bed. Works very well for most vegetables herbs and flowers.
- b. Method relies on composting the bales so straw breaks down into a rich growing media. Straw bales are ready to plant 10-14 days after setting up.
- c. Use straw bales (not hay). Straw is the grass stalk left after harvesting grains. Hay bales such as alfalfa and timothy grass don't work for this method. This has to do with the C/N ratio of straw vs. hay. Wheat, barely and rice (oats?) straws are good options and available in our area.
- d. Cost varies from \$5-12/bale relatively cheap option compared to buying garden soil. Sometimes can find for free as spoiled straw will work.
- e. Can grow in beds for one to two years, get lovely batch of compost at the end.
- f. Can make place beds in many shapes, rows, square beds etc. Each bale is ~24" x 48" x 15". Works best to set up beds with at least two bales.
- g. Bales also fit nicely into 4' x 8' framed raised beds as an alternative to using garden soil.
- h. Water efficient as beds hold moisture
- i. Gopher-proof for first year. Can easily put wire underneath to create permanent beds.

2) Making the beds.

- a. Arrange in desired shape, fit bales as closely as possible. Leave baling strings/wire in place. Good orientation to sun 8 hrs. + sun per day.
- b. Fertilize beds to add Nitrogen, a couple of options:
 - i. Add ~ 1 cup of 5% N fertilizer, various organic fertilizers, cotton seed meal
 - ii. Water in with liquid manures, every 1-2 days for about 10 days: fish emulsion, worm compost tea, liquid kelp
 - iii. Include compost topper with nitrogen source, chicken, steer, worm manure etc.
- c. Top bales with ~ 4" compost, use a mix of old straw bale beds, manures, garden compost etc. Make a lip of soil around the bed edges so water will not run off.
- d. Water thoroughly to soak bale, keep wet for ~10 days.
- e. Monitor temperature, steam, finger, or thermometer. Will get hot up to 140-160 degree F!

3) Planting the beds.

- a. Beds cool down in 10-14 days, ready to plant!
- b. Plant direct seeds or transplants.
- c. Great for lettuce, greens, broccoli and kale family crops, snow peas(!) Asian vegetables, beets etc. Not great for bulbs such as garlic and shallots though possible if avoid overwatering
- d. Scruff up straw a bit with hoe or fork before planting, add more compost if need plant into soil straw interface.
- e. Plants with fibrous root systems work great. For plants with deep taproots or tubers, e.g., carrots, potatoes need more space to grow. Burrow and pull straw to make space, add some compost to hole.



4) **Demonstration.**

- a. Discuss preparation of a new bed
- b. See a bed just started
- c. Plant a bed that is ready to go

5) **Tending the beds.**

- a. Seedbeds need to be kept continually moist, daily watering/misting until sprout.
- b. Monitor water levels with probe, wood stake, and metal bar, water when top ~3-4 inches dry out.
- c. Once plants established, watering ~once a week to 10 days will be sufficient.
- d. Add fertilizer as needed, manures, liquid fertilizers, and dry fertilizers.
- e. If use clean compost generally weed free but pull sprouting wheat/rice seeds etc.
- f. Don't be alarmed if mushrooms or slime molds appear for a short period.

6) **Next cycle.**

- a. Beds can be replanted several times per year as per central coast growing season. Spring, summer, fall, winter gardens
- b. Beds may last up to two years, size will reduce by about ½. Old straw/compost can be left in place or added to other beds.

Resources.

Straw Bale Gardening

- Amy Stewart: <http://www.finegardening.com/video-make-straw-bale-garden>
 - <http://gardenrant.com/2008/05/straw-bale-vege.html>
 - <http://www.amystewart.com/garden/straw-bale-gard/>
 - See Amy Stewart Article, Fine Gardening, June 2010
- MTGC: http://www.marinatreeandgarden.org/strawbale_gardens.html
- Solano County/UC Cooperative Extension:
http://cesolano.ucanr.edu/newsletters/Seeds_for_Thought43005.pdf

General Vegetable Gardening Information Central Coast

Golden Gate Gardening, 3rd Edition: The Complete Guide to Year-Round Food Gardening in the San Francisco Bay Area & Coastal California Paperback by Pamela Peirce, 2010, 436 p Sasquatch Books, Seattle.

Golden Gate Gardening Blog: <http://goldengategarden.typepad.com> **Planting Calendar For Foggy Areas Of San Francisco And Coastal San Mateo County**, University of California Cooperative Extension, Master Gardeners. <http://ucanr.org/sites/MGsSMSF/files/138371.pdf>