

# How to Grow a Straw Bale Garden

BY KENT ROGERS

*Kent Rogers of Wake Forest has successfully cultivated a vegetable garden in bales of straw. Kent points out that the method produces good-looking, healthy plants without weeds, and is especially convenient for people who don't have a large plot of ground to till, or who are physically unable to do a lot of kneeling, bending, raking and hoeing.*

*Here is some of his advice for people interested in straw bale gardening. Kent is a member of Wake Electric, a Touchstone Energy cooperative. You can contact him by mail at 13028 Powell Rd, Wake Forest, NC 27587, and by e-mail at [kent.rogers@earthlink.net](mailto:kent.rogers@earthlink.net)*

I have learned that wheat straw bales are the best. Pine straw won't work. Get bales that are tightly tied with synthetic twine if you can find it. Synthetic twine won't rot and it will hold the bales together longer. If the bales use regular twine, you may have to put a stake at the end to hold it together. I have paid about \$2.50 each for bales.

I arrange 10 bales per row, so they can hold each other together. Orient bales with the strings on the ground to make transplanting easier.

If you make more than one row of bales, put them wide enough apart so your lawnmower can get between them. And because you'll be watering them, place bales where the water will drain away.

You can use seeds if you add some topsoil on top of the bales. I transplant my vegetables from flats and trays directly into the bales.

## RESOURCES

Here are some Web links to articles:

[www.nicholsgardennursery.com/strawbales.htm](http://www.nicholsgardennursery.com/strawbales.htm)

[www.county.ces.uga.edu/chatham/hay\\_bales.htm](http://www.county.ces.uga.edu/chatham/hay_bales.htm)

[www.co.clay.mn.us/Depts/Extensio/ExAPHydr.htm](http://www.co.clay.mn.us/Depts/Extensio/ExAPHydr.htm)



*The large squash is a trombocino—it grew to 5 feet, 5 inches tall and weighed 16 pounds before I finally cut it off the vine.*

*I planted these red potatoes in the previous year's straw. Such beautiful potatoes—not a speck of dirt on them.*

## PREPARE YOUR BALES

It takes 10 days to prepare your bales.

**Days 1–3:** Water the bales thoroughly and keep them wet.

**Days 4–6:** Sprinkle the bales with ½ cup of ammonium nitrate (34-0-0) per bale per day and water it well.

**Days 7–9:** Cut back to ¼ cup of ammonium nitrate per bale per day and continue to water it in well.

**Day 10:** No more ammonium nitrate, but do add 1 cup of 10-10-10 fertilizer per bale and water it in well.

**Day 11:** Transplant your plants into the bales. I used a spatula to make a crack in the bale for each plant. Place the plant down to its first leaf and close the crack back together as best you can.

## WHAT TO PLANT & HOW TO CARE FOR IT

How many plants per bale? Try 2 or 3 tomato plants per bale, 3 peppers, 2 squash, 2 sets of cucumbers.

Be prepared to stake the tomatoes and peppers. I recommend 6-foot stakes for the tomatoes.

If you plant okra, you'll have to stake them, too.

Corn plants will be too top-heavy.

Water the bales in the morning and after sunset. You can't over-water because any excess will just run out of the bales. Soaker hoses will work. Do not let bales get dried out.

I started out using some Miracle Grow once a week for a couple of weeks. Then I sprinkled in some 10-10-10. Don't over fertilize.

The bales themselves will start to sprout, but that is no problem. I give my bales a "haircut" every so often with a knife.

I have not had to spray my plants with any pesticides. I haven't had any worms, bugs or other pests. Maybe it has something to do with the plants being off the ground.

At season's end you can use the bales for mulch or bust them up and set new bales on them next year. 🍅