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How to Condition &
Plant a Straw Bale Garden

When it comes to thrifty, versatile ways to garden, it's hard to beat a straw bale garden. It's inexpensive (usually well under $10), you can put it wherever you want (no soil required), and it'll eventually turn into compost – so what *is* your garden this year can *feed* your garden next year. How's that for recycling?

Many garden centers, home improvement stores, and feed stores sell straw bales. Once you bring yours home, there are just a few steps you'll want to take to get it ready for planting.

Choose a sunny spot

Once that bale gets wet, it will be much heavier and harder to move, so make sure it's where you want it to stay. If you pick a grassy area, put several layers of newspaper or a piece of cardboard underneath to keep grass and weeds from growing up into the bale.

For best results, position the bale so that the side showing cut straw ends (left), not the side with folded-over straw (right), is facing up.

Position the bale

Turn the bale narrow side up, so the strings holding the bale together are now on the sides (you don't want those strings to be on top, just in case you sever one while you're planting). On one narrow side, the straw will be folded over; on the other, it will be cut. Make sure the cut side is up, as the hollow straws will allow moisture to penetrate better.

Condition the bale

As soon as moisture hits the bale, it will start to decompose, and the inside will heat right up. Be sure to condition the bale before you plant it. This process usually takes around 10 to 14 days. For the first 3 days, simply water the bale thoroughly so it stays damp. For the next 7 days, in addition to watering the bale, use a liquid or powder fertilizer dissolved in a watering can to speed the decomposition.

As the bale goes through the conditioning process, the internal temperature may rise to 120 degrees or even higher.

On day 10, return to simply watering the bale, and continue doing that until the temperature inside the bale starts to reflect the temperature outside. Use a compost or meat thermometer to keep tabs; you'll see the temperature start to rise after the first day or two, spike about midway through the process, then start to come back down. Once it reaches the outdoor temperature, the bale is ready to plant.

Choose your plants

You can grow just about anything in a bale that you can in the ground — with a few exceptions. Tall plants like indeterminate tomatoes and corn, for example, get too tall and heavy, and can start to break the bale apart. (If you wish to grow tomatoes, stick with bush or other determinate varieties.) Running plants like sweet potatoes can be harder to grow in a bale, too. Also, if you live in a very warm, humid part of the country, the bale may begin to decompose more quickly than in other climates, so you'll want to stick with smaller plants like herbs and flowers, or use it for your cooler weather leafy crops. Whichever plants you choose, space them the same as you would in the ground.

Give these plant a few weeks and you'll have plenty of bell peppers to harvest!

Plant the bale

Remove straw to form a hole that is as deep as rootball of your plant (if you're planting a tomato, you'll want to go deeper.) Place the plant in the hole, add some quality potting soil around it for extra nutrients and stability, then fill the rest of the hole in with some of the straw you removed. Water well.

Water and fertilize regularly

Your plants will receive less nutrition from the bale than they would from soil, so it's important to fertilize them every week or two. You'll also want to make sure not to let the bale dry out.

Resource: https://bonnieplants.com/library/how-to-condition-and-plant-a-straw-bale/