

## Straw Production

An alternative enterprise that farmers may want to consider is straw production.

There is a good market for straw in the area because straw is not as available as it used to be. This is due to the increasing use of no-till farming among land owners.

Straw can be used as mulch for new seedlings, as barriers to control sedimentation in housing and industrial developments, and as deterrents to runoff in road and street construction.

### Varieties

You can use successfully any of the varieties commonly grown in your area for grain production. One of the best straw producers is rye grain planted in the fall. You can also use wheat and barley. Following are some of the varieties used in this area:

Rye	Barley	Wheat
Abruzzi	Henry	Potomac
	Surry	Severn
	Barsoy	Tyler

### Location

It is important for you to choose a proper location for your crop. Cornfields that have just been harvested are ideal sites for producing straw. Pastures or hay fields that are ready to be renewed for planting are also

good locations. Straw can be grown on any land that is suitable for row crops.

### Soil Preparation/Fertilization

A pH of 6.3 to 6.5 that is suitable for most other crops will be adequate for growing straw. Also, the nutrients left by other crops can be used by the straw crop. For example, most cornfields or tobacco fields have enough phosphorus and potash content to provide nutrients for the straw crop. If you apply extra nitrogen in late February (60 pounds of actual nitrogen per acre) you will get more bales per acre.

Test the soil to determine fertilizer needs. As a general rule, on land where phosphorus and potash are low, you should add 400 pounds of 10-20-20 per acre in the fall at planting time and then 150 pounds of urea per acre in late February.

If you have used the land for row crops, you will need to prepare the seedbed by *discing* and *smoothing*. Plowing old, established hay fields or pastures may be necessary to destroy the sod. You also have to smooth the field to produce straw for good cutting and baling.

The next step is *seeding*, which you do with a grain drill or a cyclone type of seeder. If you seed with a cyclone-type seeder, use a smoothing harrow afterwards to give the seed good soil contact. Remember, the grain seed does not need to be covered deeply. One-and-one-half bushels of grain seeds per acre is the recommended ratio.

## Planting

Planting dates in southern Maryland for the production of straw are September 1 to 30. Planting before September 1 can lead to winter injury caused by excessive growth in the fall.

You can plant hay crops such as orchard-grass, timothy, and clovers with the grain crop if you want, to follow the straw harvest with a hay harvest.

## Care of the Crop

One acre should yield 90 to 100 bales of straw weighing 45 pounds each if you have applied the proper nutrients to the soil and the crop has enough water.

## Harvesting

Here are some guidelines to follow when it is time to harvest your straw crop:

- Begin cutting the straw about the time you see a few heads coming up. Soon after the heads begin to form, the bottom leaves start to deteriorate. Getting the straw off early will prevent it from competing with grass and legume plants. Early cutting also makes for better, more leafy straw.

- Straw should be cut and crimped just like hay. You can use rotary mowers to cut straw when mower conditioners are not available. Keep in mind that most buyers at straw markets like their straw chopped some so that it is not long and stemmy.
- Do not bale straw, like hay, until it is dry enough to keep in the bale. (One advantage that straw has over hay—rain does not hurt it that much.) Ted it up, dry it out, and bale it.
- Bales have to be tight. Straw marketers do not like loose bales because they are too hard to haul. Be sure the baler you use makes tight bales.

## Marketing Your Product

It is a good idea to get your market lined up before producing your straw. Many horse owners like good, clean, yellow straw to use as bedding for their horses. Perhaps you can even have buyers pick up the straw in your field. Marketing the straw ahead of time and having the customer pick it up saves storage labor and time.

Tobacco barns make good storage sheds. Store straw if you cannot sell it out of the field.

## Costs and Returns for 1 Acre

Costs		
Rye seed	1-1/2 bushels @ \$3/bu	\$4.50
Fertilizer	400 pounds 10-20-20 & 150 pounds urea @ \$0.09/lb	\$49.50
Bale string	100 bales straw @ \$0.05/bale	\$5.00
	Total cash cost	\$59.00
Returns		
	100 bales straw @ \$1.50/bale	\$150.00
	Net returns per acre (\$150 - \$59) =	\$91.00

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, University of Maryland, College Park, and local governments. Bruce L. Gardner, Interim Director of Maryland Cooperative Extension, University of Maryland.

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