


STRAW BALE GARDENING

with Pam Ruch

nurturenaturecenter.org

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A photograph showing a garden bed in winter. The ground is covered in a thick layer of snow. A layer of straw mulch is visible, partially covered by the snow. In the background, there is a chain-link fence and some bare trees. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Straw is a great garden resource,
whether used for straw bale
gardening or for other purposes.

Get some in fall and let
it sit outside over the
winter. Any seeds will
germinate and die, and
it will be ready to use
as a mulch or soil
conditioner in spring.

TO MAKE A STRAW BALE GARDEN:

Step 1: In spring, place bales where they will get at least 6 hours of sun a day, with the cut side on top, strings on side.



Arrange them as you wish. I find that butting them together works better to preserve moisture.



This is the “cut side”



Photo: Brick House Acres Rabbits, Frankfort, NY

Rabbit poop makes excellent fertilizer!
(and it can be purchased if you don't have a ready source)

Step 2: Condition your straw bale

Sprinkle high N fertilizer every other day for 10 days, dousing with a gallon of water each time.



Photo: The Wisconsin Vegetable Gardener

STEP 3: Plant Seedlings

Dig into the bales, extracting straw as needed, and insert plants.



Photo: Nicole Cotroneo Jolly, Modernfarmer.com

Or, top with a soilless mix and sow seeds.



Photo: Craig LeHoullier, craiglehoullier.com



STEP 4: Irrigation is essential! I set a hose-end timer to water automatically for 6 minutes every 6 hours, 24 hours a day.





Use a flexible soaker hose to irrigate.



STEP 5: Fertilize weekly, using a liquid, balanced fertilizer. A hose end sprayer (left) will make this easy.



Or use rabbit poop every couple of weeks!



STEP 6:

Make a strong structure to support tomatoes and other vining plants.

We made this structure at Nurture Nature Center last year using bamboo and zip ties. Note that it is supported by the bales themselves.

WHAT TO PLANT? Try anything!



Photo by Susan Laird, originally posted in villagelife.com



**Tomatoes, Peppers, Kale,
Eggplants, Zucchini**

Mushrooms can grow in the
bales. They will not cause
any problems.

Photos by Craig LeHoullier



A productive
Community
Garden in
Pittsburgh



Our Nurture Nature
Center straw bale
garden with tomatoes
and zucchini



Your straw bales will warm up more quickly than garden soil. For added frost protection, you can cover plants with plastic or row cover.

Right: Oakleaf lettuce grew well in our straw bale garden!





Even sweet potatoes
can grow in bales!

STEP 7: HARVEST!





And after the season, rotted
straw makes great mulch and
COMPOST!