

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

Container gardening with a new lift

BY SIOUX ROGERS

Even though I work very hard in my vegetable garden, I am basically lazy. If there is an easy way to do gardening and I haven't done it, I will most likely figure it out soon enough. I have never been a turning-plowing-and-hoeing type of gal. In other words, I have never turned my garden soil over, even just once a year. I actually pile nutrients on top of the soil—aged animal manure, compost I have been saving, aged leaves, or whatever else is the garden du jour. I let earthworms and ol' mum nature do the rest of the work.

I've discovered that straw-bale gardening appears to satisfy most of my garden fantasies, good, great, grandiose, and yes, my personal style of lazy gardening will be appeased. Whoopee for my aching back—I barely need to bend over to plant or to harvest the crops. Actually, the concept, as it is evolving, makes very good sense and has more advantages than disadvantages. The worst part, at least for me, is that the straw bales are heavy and bulky.

Now for the easy one-two-three steps. The steps below, gleaned from several websites, are how I plan to plant, which means I have tweaked the original instructions. As an aside, if you are *not* making your own compost, but buy bags of "filthy rich soil," the cost of one bag of soil is just about the same as one large bale of straw.

Before I explain the few easy steps for straw-bale planting, here is why this gardening style actually works: "The digestive process of insects, worms, fungi, mold, and bacteria (the most important decomposer) breaks down the straw. This

process...involves keeping the bales wet and introducing nitrogen as a food source for the bacteria inside the bales. This food source and water supply, along with temperatures above 45 degrees, encourages the rapid reproduction of bacteria in the core of the bale. The bacteria will reproduce or divide about every 15 minutes given these ideal conditions" (fix.com/blog/straw-bale-gardening).

Now let's begin.

1. Place your straw bale exactly where you want to plant. Remember, the bales are heavy and you don't want to be the "moving service for straw bales" more than once. Barley or wheat straw works hunky-dory. Make sure the twines are horizontal around the bale and not directly on the ground or the twine, too, will decompose. For several days prior to planting, heavily water the bales every day.

2. At about day three, prepare the bales as you would in a "low-down dirt garden." For example, if you plan to grow carrots, beets, lettuce, or anything scattered in a row, trench out long crevices on the top of the bale. If you are thinking about plants that go into holes, such as eggplant, peppers, okra, basil, etc., dig holes four to six inches deep several inches apart on the top of a bale.

3. Begin sprinkling

the holes or trenches with your own compost, store-bought compost, aged manure, clean healthy garden soil, etc. The decomposing straw will also provide ongoing nutrients. It takes at least 12 to 18 days for the straw to begin to decompose sufficiently before you can begin planting. If you have seedlings or small starts, gently place them in holes and hunker them in also. Now cover with whatever material is hanging around.

Next season, plant in the same holes again, which will now be even more nutrient-filled. I personally will likely add some fresh but aged amendments to the previously used holes. As the straw sitting on my raised beds decomposes, underneath I will have an abundance of earthworms and microbial activity to add to the next growing straw-bale "planters." This is just my fantasy, but approximates what I have learned from my research.

Although I don't know how many seasons each bale will last, I'll find out starting next spring. At the very least, I will have some wonderful "alive" straw that can be used just about anywhere in my gardens.

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Top photo: Dig holes for plants like eggplant and basil (step 2) (photo: au.pinterest.com). Bottom photo: Begin planting after the straw has decomposed sufficiently (step 3) (photo: modernfarmer.com).

Straw-bale gardens are easy and can satisfy your fantasies, says the author (photos: cvog.blogspot.com and wsumgto.wordpress.com).



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