



# Straw Bale Gardening

*My Personal Experience*

*Lee Ann Wille*

*Illinois Master Naturalist*

*Iowa Master Conservationist*

Behold my friends, the spring is come; the Earth has the embraces of the sun, and we shall soon see the results of their love. -  
Sitting Bull

Flowers always make people better, happier and more helpful; they are sunshine, food and medicine for the soul. - Luther Burbank

The master of the garden is the one who waters it, trims the branches, plants seeds and pulls the weeds. If you merely stroll through the garden, you are but an acolyte. - Vera Nazarian

Time to think  
**SPRING**



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## Why do it? – Pluses (+’s)

- Relatively inexpensive
- If you have limited space
- Can grow most vegetables
- Allows for earlier planting
- Less water (can't overwater)
- No soil fungus splash from rain
- Practically weed free
- Like raised beds for disabled (portable if strong)
- Straw can be composted or dug into soil
- No soil or container needed
- Can be placed in same spot year after year
- Pests don't like it

## Why do it? – Minuses (-'s)

- Bale usually last just one season
- May need a ground cover to keep grass or weeds from growing into the bale
- Mat needed if on patio or deck to prevent staining
- Also ask where the bales come from and what if any pesticides were used

# What do you need?

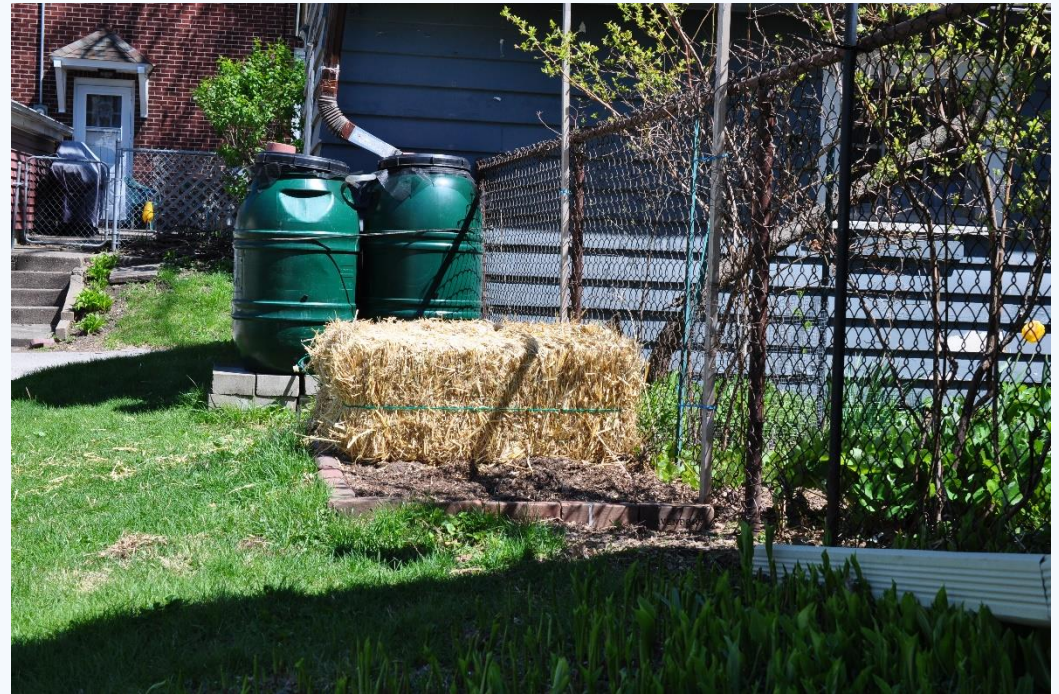
- Straw bale(s) not hay
  - Shop around – we've used Wallace's in Davenport
  - Fertilizer (high in nitrogen)
  - Water – from our rain barrels
  - Tools – Small pruning saw, trowel, cages and/or poles, gloves, and thermometer
- Why Straw
    - Straw comes from grains (oat, wheat, flax, rye, barley)
    - Straw is the by-product after food removed
    - Used as animal bedding
  - Not Hay
    - Hay is grass (alfalfa) and will grow in the bale
    - Used as animal fodder, it's food



Area for straw bales prior to clean-up and setting bales in place; old straw mostly decomposed.



*Bale placement. We will try parallel to fence next year (you will see why later)*



# Getting Started – Let's have some fun

- \*Get the most compact (dense) bale (can weigh 35-75 lbs.)
- \*Leave the baling cords on
- \*Make sure cut side is up (cut ends (looks like a straw) – allows water & fertilizer to soak into the bale)

- Conditioning (10-14 days)
- Water & Fertilizer create heat and grow bacteria already in the bale
- Decomposition of bale creates growing medium

Fertilizer: Nitrogen is most important

- N (nitrogen) 29
- P (phosphorus) 0
- K (potassium) 4

Note: Avoid fertilizers with herbicides or pesticides

## Day 1

- Sprinkle one-half ( $\frac{1}{2}$ ) cup fertilizer on cut end surface
- Water in well – until water runs out of bottom of bale

## Day 2

- Water only – keep bale saturated
- Remember you can't over water – it just runs out the bottom of the bale



*April - Sometimes you do not have to water the bales or the plants*



## Day 3

- Sprinkle one-half ( $\frac{1}{2}$ ) cup fertilizer on cut end surface
- Water in well – until water runs out of bottom of bale

## Day 4

- Water only – bale may not take as much water but keep bale saturated
- Remember you can't over water – it just runs out the bottom of the bale

## Day 5

- Sprinkle one-half ( $\frac{1}{2}$ ) cup fertilizer on cut end surface
- Water in well

## Day 6

- Water only – bale may not take as much water but keep bale saturated
- Water should be warmish (ambient air temp) set aside buckets overnight if you don't have rain barrels
- Cold water from faucet will slow the decomposition
- Start taking temperature of bale

## Days 7, 8 & 9

- Sprinkle one-quarter ( $1/4$ ) cup fertilizer on cut end surface
- Water in well
- Take temperature of bale; again temperature can get as high as 150 degrees in the center – not absolute
- Note: Mushroom growth is a good sign (not edible). Shows decomposing bale and bacteria growth – not harmful to bale
- Bale may be getting darker in color



*Planted two plants per bale:*

- Celebrity*
- Better Boy*
- Sweet 100*
- Juliet*

*Also had two volunteers in the dirt to the right side*



# Day 10

- Sprinkle one (1) cup 10-10-10 (general garden) fertilizer on cut end surface
- Water
- If voids or cracks form fill with straw or sterile potting mix.
- Do Not use garden soil as this introduces soil pathogens and weeds

## Day 11

- Purchase plants or ready your forced veggies
- Water in well
- Take temperature of bale; bale temperature may start to decline – good sign

## Days 12-14

- PLANT & Water
- You will need to cut out holes for plants (pruning saw & trowel)
- We use home made compost as an additive
- This is the time to add cages and/poles when plants are small

Mid May





*Mid-June*

*Late-June*



July - August



Early September



# Harvesting one of many baskets



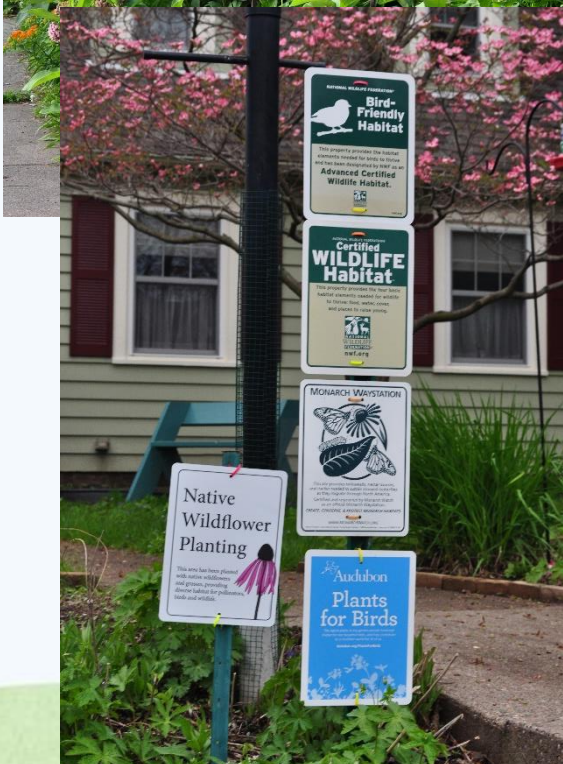
# Straw Bales – Why we are limited on space



Native  
plantings

Side Yard

# Front yard







*Back Yard*

*We have also planted potatoes in a bag*



Resources – there are many

Websites:

Just type “straw bale gardening” into your search engine

**Books:** *Straw Bale Gardening Complete* by Joel Karsten from Cool Springs Press  
(also an updated edition)

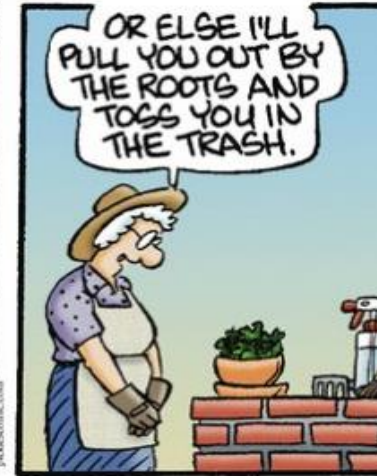
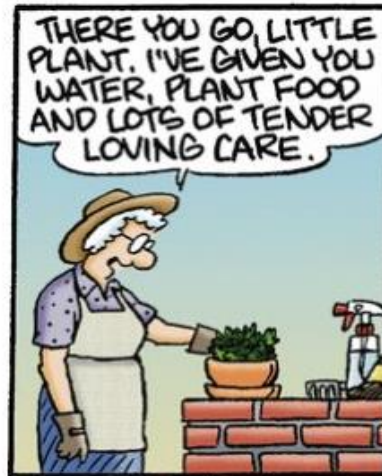
*Straw Bale Gardening* (from the *Idiot's Guides* series) by John Tullock from Alpha

*Growing Vegetables in Straw Bales* by Craig LeHoullier from Storey Publishing

Nurseries: Teskes – (309) 762-7575 Moline  
(563) 355-7230 Bettendorf  
Wallaces – (563) 332-4711 Bettendorf  
(563) 445-2458 Davenport  
Green Thumbers – (563) 323-0055  
Hilltop Gardens – (309) 791-8765 Illinois City



"If all goes according to plan, this garden should reach crisis proportions by midsummer."



Crabby Road

3-29-12

I like to help the neighbors with their garden. I mean, somebody's got to eat all those veggies!



Jo Wagner

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A good reason for straw bales – no weeds

