

# Straw Bale Gardening Tips

Adapted from Joel Karsten, Author of "Straw Bale Gardens Complete"

## Alternative procedure to condition the bales

- Start two weeks before the average last frost date (in Green Bay – approx. May 10)
- Allow 10-12 days for this process
- Start nitrogen "sink" reversal & bacteria build up
- Begin by adding food, that's NITROGEN
  - Fertilizers have number system identifying what's in them
  - N – P – K
  - Nitrogen – Phosphorus – Potassium
  - You're looking for a high N number, low to no P or K
  - Urea is 44 – 0 – 0, Blood meal is 12 – 0 – 0
  - Other options: Organic: Bone meal, alfalfa meal, feather meal, Milorganite, Commercial: lawn fertilizer
  - Do not use fertilizer with weed killer
- Bacterium and microorganisms colonize inside, mushrooms bloom
- Bales get HOT, peaking at 130-145° and stay warm
- Worms thrive, castings are gardener's gold
- Results are lovely nitrogen rich MEDIA inside

## Step by Step Conditioning:

- Day 1:
  - Lawn/commercial fertilizers or urea: sprinkle ½ cup of fertilizer on each bale, end to end and side to side. Soak with water until it runs out of the bottom of the bale
  - Organic fertilizers: sprinkle 3 cups on each bale and soak with water
- Day 2: Water bails thoroughly (warm water can be better, collect rain water or put water in buckets the day before to let it warm)
- Day 3: Fertilize in same amount as Day 1, water
- Day 4: Water thoroughly
- Day 5: Fertilize in same amount as Day 1, water
- Day 6: Water thoroughly. Bale should start to have a smell be warming up (can check with a meat or compost thermometer)
- Day 7, 8, 9: Fertilize with ¼ cup commercial fertilizer or urea, 1 ½ cups organic fertilizer and water
- Day 10: Apply one cup of balanced fertilizer 10 – 10 – 10, water
- Day 11: Nothing
- Day 12 and later: Start planting! Make sure bale has cooled to less than 100° (should feel like warm bath water if you put your hand in). Transplants can go directly in the bale. For seeds, put a thin layer (1-2 inches) of potting mix on the top of the bale and plant into that. DO NOT use garden soil.

## What to Plant:

- Easier to identify what NOT to plant
  - Sweet corn - too big
  - Rhubarb & asparagus - perennials
- Vegetables
- Root-crops (prefer second year bale)
- Vine-crops
- Herbs (not rosemary)
- Flowers

## Purchase Straw Bales around Green Bay

- Consider if you are worried about pesticides/herbicides use on the straw. Plants most likely won't pick up the chemicals, but the leftover straw could contaminate the soil if incorporated into your garden beds. Not much information is known about the use of bales that have encountered chemicals
  - Watch out for: Pyridine carboxylic acids: picloram, clopyralid and aminopyralid
- Can test for herbicides if worried
  - WI State Agency, State Department – Department of Agriculture
  - Homeowners can test it themselves – put bean or pea seed in first to see how well it will grow – if active, leaves will be pale, twisted, weird. Not normal - worried
- Waseda Farms Market: 330 Reid St, De Pere, WI 54115, [\(920\) 632-7271](tel:9206327271), certified organic
- Kimps Ace Hardware: 434-1079, 2548 Glendale Ave, Green Bay, 54313
- Steins
- Local Nurseries
- Local Farmers: John in Lena: [920-604-1966](tel:9206041966) not certified organic, but does not use pesticides/herbicides/fertilizer
- Craigslist

## Resources:

- Book: "Straw Bale Gardens Complete" by Joel Karsten
  - <https://strawbalegardens.com/>
  - <https://www.facebook.com/learntogrowastrawbalegarden>
- Green Bay Botanical Garden
  - Education Manager – Linda Gustke, 920-491-3691 ext. 122, [lgustke@gbbg.org](mailto:lgustke@gbbg.org)
- UW Extension – Horticulture Help Desk – 920-391-4615, [bc\\_uw\\_extension\\_horticulture@co.brown.wi.us](mailto:bc_uw_extension_horticulture@co.brown.wi.us)
- University of Arizona publication:  
[https://cals.arizona.edu/cochise/waterwise/pdf/Gardening/Strawbalegardens\\_6-13.pdf](https://cals.arizona.edu/cochise/waterwise/pdf/Gardening/Strawbalegardens_6-13.pdf)