



Garden smarter, not harder: Discover Straw Bale Gardening

What is straw bale gardening?

Straw bale gardening is a method to grow fresh fruits and vegetables directly in bales of straw instead of in the ground. This method is great for Farm to Early Care and Education (ECE) settings that have limited gardening space.

Why try it?

Straw bale gardening provides a warm, nutrient-rich environment perfect for vegetables, fruits, herbs, and even flowers.

- Lacking soil space? No problem! Straw bales can be placed anywhere- even on top of concrete or cement such as a patio
- There are fewer weeds than traditional soil gardening. Less weeds = more time learning and exploring your growing seedlings
- As the straw bales decompose, they create a warm environment for the roots-this is great for us in the colder months of the year
- Straw bales are the perfect height for kids to participate and watch the plants grow

[USDA Policy Memo CACFP 11-2015, Local Foods in the CACFP with Questions and Answers](#)

“Costs associated with growing food that will be used in the CACFP, either as part of the meal service or for activities related to nutrition education for food service staff, as allowable. These costs may include seeds, fertilizer, labor, plot rental, etc.”





How to Get Started

Step 1: Find your bales

- You can buy straw bales directly from local farmers or your nearest gardening store. Make sure it is straw and not hay. Hay bales still have plant seeds attached and will make a weedy mess.

Step 2: Place your bales and start conditioning

- Place the straw bales in a sunny location. Leave room around the straw bales for children to help and observe
- Two weeks prior to planting, you must condition the bale by alternating watering and fertilizing. Use a fertilizer rich in nitrogen to help the decomposition process.

Step 3: Dig holes, fill with potting soil, and plant seeds or seedlings

- Create small holes on top of the straw bales and fill with potting soil.
- Follow directions on the seed package for seed depth and spacing.
- If using seedlings, the holes must be deep enough and wide enough to accommodate the roots of the plant

Step 4: Water and feed

Don't forget to water your plants daily! Using a small amount of fertilizer each week will help the plants grow. Be careful though- too much nitrogen rich fertilizer will burn the plants

Incorporate Gardening into your Curriculum

Integrating straw bale gardening into your curriculum is a great hands-on way your children can learn the plant life cycle and where their food comes from.

Create age appropriate lessons and fun activities that correlates with gardening such as:

- Read gardening books or books about plants
- Help develop fine motor skills for younger children by having them plant the seeds and use small watering cans
- Teach students new vocabulary words related to gardening
- Create jobs for the students to complete such as watering, observing growth, checking for pests, and harvesting



Once you are ready to harvest, incorporate your fresh pickings into your meals or snacks. Have the kids do a taste test while exploring the shapes, colors, and textures of your harvest.