

The Grapevine

Straw Bale Gardening

You want me to garden in what? Growing vegetables in straw bales has been growing in popularity across the United States over the last few years. There are many benefits to growing vegetables in straw and several reasons why people have tried this unique method of gardening. While straw bale gardening might not work for everyone, and let's be honest there is no gardening method that will work for every person, I do think it is something everyone should try at least once.

There are many reasons gardeners try straw bale gardening. One of the most common reasons I've heard relates to the poor condition of the soil they have to garden in. The straw bale sits on top of the soil so you can avoid planting in soil that is contaminated with disease or even by chemicals. If you have very heavy clay soils or soil that is very rocky due to where you live, gardening on top of the ground might work for you. Another reason that I commonly hear is the gardener has issues with mobility and the straw bales are a cheaper alternative to purchasing containers or raised beds. Unlike raised beds, straw bales do not have to be in the same spot every year, you are stuck in that one spot for a year as the bales get heavy once watered in, but the next year you start over with new bales in a different location. One of the biggest benefits of straw bales is the compost they produce during the growing season which can be incorporated into your garden spot to improve poor soils.



Straw bale gardening is fairly simple. You place straw bales, make sure the cut ends are facing up, in a location that gets at least 6 to 8 hours of sunlight. Straw, not hay bales, work best as they tend to have fewer weeds or seeds that will grow when you water them. Once the bales have been placed where you want them it's time to "condition" the bales over a 12-day time period. Essentially you are starting the composting process using water and fertilizer. Conditioning follows the process below:

- **Day 1-3** Water the bale to saturation
- **Day 4-6** Sprinkle 1/2 c. Urea (46 - 0 - 0) on the top of each bale and water the fertilizer in, careful not to wash the fertilizer away. The fertilizer should start to work its way into the bale from the stream of water. It may not completely disappear but it should not remain entirely on the top of the bale.
- **Day 7-9** Reduce the fertilizer to 1/4 c. Urea and water the fertilizer in
- **Day 10-11** Stop fertilizing, keep the bale moist.

As the decomposition process starts the bale will start to heat up with the microbes breaking down the straw. This is a good sign. Check the top of the bale on day 11 and as long as it is cool to the touch you are ready to start planting. You can grow almost any vegetable in the bales with the exception of corn (only because they get top heavy and fall over with the height of the corn). If you are planting plants directly into the bales make a hole with a trowel or knife and place a small amount of potting soil or compost in the hole to plant the transplants in. If you are using seeds, spread a layer of compost or potting soil across the top of the bale and plant like you would in the ground.

After the bales are conditioned and planted water and fertilizer will be important. Watering will be key, especially during the hot days of summer. Many people use a soaker hose to keep the bales damp. Watering by hand is also a great option as you can scout for diseases or any other issues while you are watering. You will have to add a complete fertilizer, one with Nitrogen, Phosphorous and Potassium, to keep the plants growing as there are not enough nutrients in the bales themselves. During periods of active growth or vegetable production you might have to fertilize once a week depending on the fertilizer being used. Once the season is over the bales can be broken apart on a compost pile or a future garden spot.

Straw bale gardening is an interesting alternative to growing the garden in the ground and it can be a less expensive way to garden in a raised bed fashion. It's definitely something to try in your yard. Be aware during hot and dry periods you may have to water the bales twice a day to keep the moisture levels high enough. Happy Growing!

Kansas State University is committed to making its services, activities and programs accessible to all participants. If you have special requirements due to a physical, vision, or hearing disability, contact Calla Edwards, KSRE – Butler Co. Horticulture Agent, 316-321-9660.

Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service
K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Activity of the Week- Creating a Seed Tape

I love growing carrots and lettuce but I will admit I hate thinning the seedlings as they come up. I don't know about you but I tend to not scatter the seeds evenly so I always have to thin plus I hate losing a plant that could be producing. Not only is it tedious to pull the seedlings it also can be hard to do if you have arthritis in your hands or other issues. Seed tape is a wonderful alternative to help space those seeds out correctly and limits the amount of time you have to spend on your hands and knees. There are several options for seed tape on the market but they aren't always a variety I like or one that works in my area. Luckily it is pretty easy to make your own seed tape. All you need is some toilet paper or any type of paper that will dissolve when wet, an adhesive of some type such as Elmers glue (or make your own out of water and flour) and vegetable seeds. Lay out your toilet paper and tear it to the length that you want, figure out the spacing between seeds you need for your vegetables (check that packaging or the Extension publications) and place some adhesive toward one edge on those spots then place your seeds on the adhesive. You can then fold the paper over to hold the seed in place. Roll the seed tape up of it's too early to plant the seed tape and store in a cool, dry place till it's time to plant. Check out this video on making a seed tape: https://youtu.be/XOS9eW5l_Oc



Insect of the Week- Cecropia Moth

As we get started with the growing season, usually in April, I will highlight a disease or insect that I have had calls or questions about. This week I had an unusual insect cocoon brought in for identification. The homeowner found the cocoon in their tree and they had never seen anything like it before. The cocoon, much like the one in the



picture to the right, had the remains of the caterpillar in it that had been parasitized by another insect. The cocoon is approximately 2 inches long, tan in color and appears to be made of a silk like material. The full-grown moth is one of the most spectacular moths that we have in the Kansas region. The moths have a reddish body with huge (5-7") black to brown wings that have bands of white, red and tan. They are the largest moth found in the United States. The moths are often attracted to street and porch lights which is where most people will see them. Caterpillars feed on hardwood tree leaves throughout the summer but are rarely a pest of any significance.



Video of the Week-Planning the Garden- When gardening on a budget, it's important to consider your gardening priorities -- because that's going to affect both what you plant in your garden, and how you choose to spend your money. https://youtu.be/x5n_9ec_-BE

Reminders-

- If you haven't started your broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, Brussel sprouts or lettuce seeds (if doing transplants) do so ASAP. It's still too early to start tomato or pepper seeds at this point, wait till March for those plants.
- Check houseplants for insects and trim them back as needed. Don't forget to fertilize periodically throughout the winter.
- Trim Amaryllis blooms off after the stalks start to dry out. Treat them as houseplants till the danger of frost is over and then transition them outdoors for the summer.

Upcoming Events

- *March 1st at Noon- Houseplants: Basics and Beyond*
Over 66% of U.S. households have at least one houseplant, but often the terms used to describe their care can be confusing. Join Cassie Thiessen, Post Rock District Horticulture Extension Agent, & Calla Edwards, Butler County Horticulture Extension Agent, as they decode common houseplants terms related to light, water, and other plant needs. Learn about some unique houseplants and the best practices to keep them thriving. For more information on the Garden Hour series [click here](#).
- *March 6th at 7 pm- Planning and Problem Solving in the Garden*
Gardening has become an extremely popular activity in the United States. Many of the biggest issues that gardeners have start with not planning the garden out and getting it started correctly at the beginning of the year. Join us to learn the basics of planning the garden from where to plant to when, why rotating plants is important and to cover some basic problem solving for the most common issues that gardeners face. This event will be at 7 pm at the Augusta United Methodist Church at 2420 Ohio Street, Augusta, KS.
- *March 14th at 6 pm- So you want to grow vegetables in containers?*
Are you interested in growing your own vegetables but live in an apartment, have a shady backyard or have a physical limitation that prevents you from gardening in the ground? Container vegetable gardening is a great way to still grow your own vegetables on your window sill, patio, porch or even your front step. Join us at the Bradford Memorial Library to learn how to grow your own tomatoes, corn, herbs and any vegetable in a container.
- *April 5th at Noon- Growing to New Heights with Vertical Gardening*
Make the most of your garden by growing up, instead of out. Create vertical gardens to get your garden off of the ground, provide more space for plants, and expand your gardening area. Join Amanda Groleau, Frontier District Horticulture Extension Agent, as she shares the benefits of vertical gardening. Learn which fruits, vegetables, and flowers will grow best in a vertical garden and how to get started. For more information on the Garden Hour series [click here](#).



K-STATE Sedgwick County
Research and Extension

DESIGN & GROW GARDENING WORKSHOP

SATURDAY, MARCH 4, 2023

Held at the
Sedgwick County
Extension Center, 4-H Hall
7001 W. 21st St. N, Wichita

Morning:

- 9 a.m. to noon
- 3 tracks of gardening lectures
- \$10 by Feb. 24th, \$15 after

Afternoon:

- 1:30 to 3:30 p.m.
- Choose from 3 hands-on workshops
 - Indoor Seed Starting
 - Composting
 - Lawn Mowing Clinic
- Additional \$20 by Feb. 24th, \$25 after

 **See the complete schedule and register at sedgwick.ksu.edu/events**

K-State Research and Extension is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services and activities. Program information may be available in languages other than English. Reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities, including alternative means for communication (e.g., Braille, large print, audio tape, and American Sign Language) may be requested by contacting the event contact Rebecca McMahon two weeks prior to the start of the event (2/17/2023) at (316-660-0142 rmcmahon@ksu.edu). Requests received after this date will be honored when it is feasible to do so. Language access services, such as interpretation or translation of vital information will be provided free of charge to limited English proficient individuals upon request.
Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service
K-State Research and Extension is an equal opportunity provider and employer.



the Art of Succulants

2023 HARVEY COUNTY HOME AND GARDEN SHOW

\$1.00 Admission; Under 12 Free

SATURDAY, MARCH 25, 8:30AM-5:00PM
SUNDAY, MARCH 26, 12:00PM-5:00PM

Dyck Arboretum of the Plains
177 W. Hickory St.
Hesston Kansas

K-STATE
Research and Extension
Master Gardener

K-State Research and Extension is committed to providing equal opportunity for participation in all programs, services and activities. Program information may be available in languages other than English. Reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities, including alternative means for communication (e.g., Braille, large print, audio tape, and American Sign Language) may be requested by contacting the event contact Scott Eckert two weeks prior to the start of the event at 316-284-6930. Requests received after this date will be honored when it is feasible to do so. Language access services, such as interpretation or translation of vital information will be provided free of charge to limited English proficient individuals upon request.

harvey.k-state.edu
This Location is a Smoking/Tobacco Free Area