



A Book Review

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**Straw Bale Gardens: The Breakthrough Method for Growing Vegetables Anywhere, Earlier and with No Weeding by Joel Karsten**

This past spring, while researching what edibles to plant in my garden, I came across a new “breakthrough method” for growing vegetables. Joel Karsten’s technique of producing wholesome vegetables with no tilling, cultivating, or weeding is explained in *Straw Bale Gardens*. Because it has been increasingly difficult each year for me to prepare the soil in my garden, I decided to pick up Karsten’s book at my local library to see if this was something I might want to try.

The book did not disappoint. Rather, it gave me the opportunity to become creative in my gardening experience. Gone were the tried and true soil preparations of the past such as tilling or turning the soil twice, fear of overwatering and weed control, and garden location. I was excited to try this method of growing vegetables, and I began the “conditioning” process (see below) on May 5.

Karsten explains the process of “conditioning” the bales (wetting and fertilizing the bales for 10 days for the internal straw to start composting). Within the book are layouts and suggested plants for a 5-bale, 10-bale, 15-bale, and 20-bale garden, depending on how large a harvest is desired. The bales should be purchased in the fall, preferably from a farm; and to prevent the spread of fungus, mold, virus or bacterial infections, a morning sun location is best so that leaves dry early in the day. A minimum of four feet of space between each straw bale is desirable to be able to walk comfortably between rows. The cut side of the bale should be positioned up so water can easily be absorbed.

When I purchased the straw bales from a local nursery they were very heavy and awkward to transport. At the end of the season (approximately seven months) the bales had begun to deteriorate and were much lighter and easier to remove from my garden. They were soft, gray in color, and much lighter than they were in the spring. I broke my garden down the first weekend of November. The bales broke apart into sections making cleanup a breeze. I left some of the straw to compost over the winter and will use it in my pots and planters in the spring. The ease of straw bale gardening far outweighs traditional gardening methods.

**I used the 5-bale layout for my garden and I purchased the following:**

- \* 5 harvested straw bales
- \* 5# of high nitrogen fertilizer (29-0-4) for conditioning
- \* General garden fertilizer (10-10-10) for the final treatment
- \* 1 large bag of Miracle Gro\ Planting Mix
- \* 2 bags of mulch for the base of the garden
- \* Stakes
- \* Deer netting
- \* Plants

The pros and cons for using the straw bale garden method of growing vegetables is as follows:

**Pros:**

- 1) Working in the garden was much easier. The plants were high off the ground so I could sit on a stool to work.
- 2) There was very little weeding involved.
- 3) I had a fantastic crop of tomatoes that lasted into November.



### Cons:

- 1) I purchased five straw bales at \$8.99 each. If I had purchased them in the fall, they would have been cheaper.
- 2) A simple trowel to dig the holes for each plant did not work. Since I purchased the bales in the spring right before planting, they were not able to aerate over the winter, making the straw difficult to manipulate. I needed a reciprocating saw to dig the holes for the plants to get the proper width and depth.

Everything you need to know about growing vegetables is in *Straw Bale Gardens*. You can find this book at your local library, but for \$19.99 you can purchase it and have it handy to refer to anytime. If you are looking for something fun to do next spring, give it a try.

