

Straw Bale Gardens

BREAKTHROUGH VEGETABLE GARDENING METHOD

Marlenea La Shomb

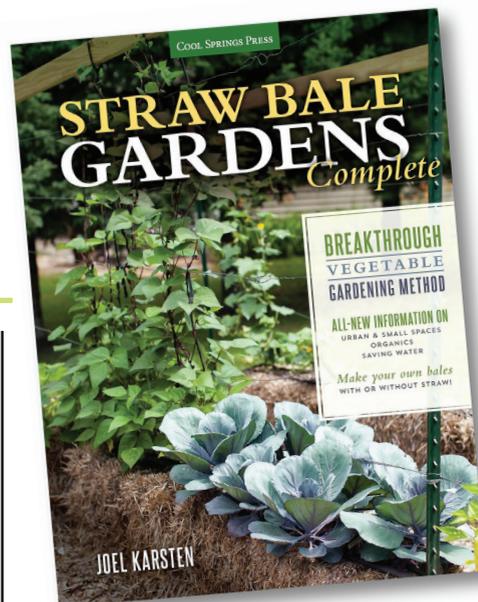
Container gardening takes on a whole new approach when you think of using a bale of straw for your container. That's what Joel Karsten has dreamed up—and taken all the guesswork out for you—with his book, *Straw Bale Gardens Complete*. I read the book straight through, cover-to-cover; I just couldn't put it down! You can find it at your local library or bookstore.

Joel, a farmboy, grew up tending a soil garden, like other gardeners have for centuries, until he shook up the gardening world with his new concepts and book. This type of vegetable garden is great for urban and small spaces; it can be set up on a patio or balcony with just one bale or on a driveway with ten bales. A chef in the Netherlands even got excited about planting his herbs for cooking on his rooftop. Think community gardens! Yes, the possibilities are endless. If you have a huge tree or trees in your yard and can't even dig because of all the roots, no problem—just set the bales on top of the ground, above all those roots. No digging will be required and you'll feed your trees at the same time. This system is also great for retired gardeners. Because the beds are elevated there's less bending over for those bad backs, even for those in wheelchairs. Joel includes a chapter on water

saving; one lady even used her grey water from the kitchen sink to water her whole garden. You will be amazed at how many vegetables and herbs you can grow in one bale of straw and it's weed-free! That's right, there's no weeding, it produces high yields and extends your growing season, and it can be used for either conventional or 100% organic gardening—your choice.

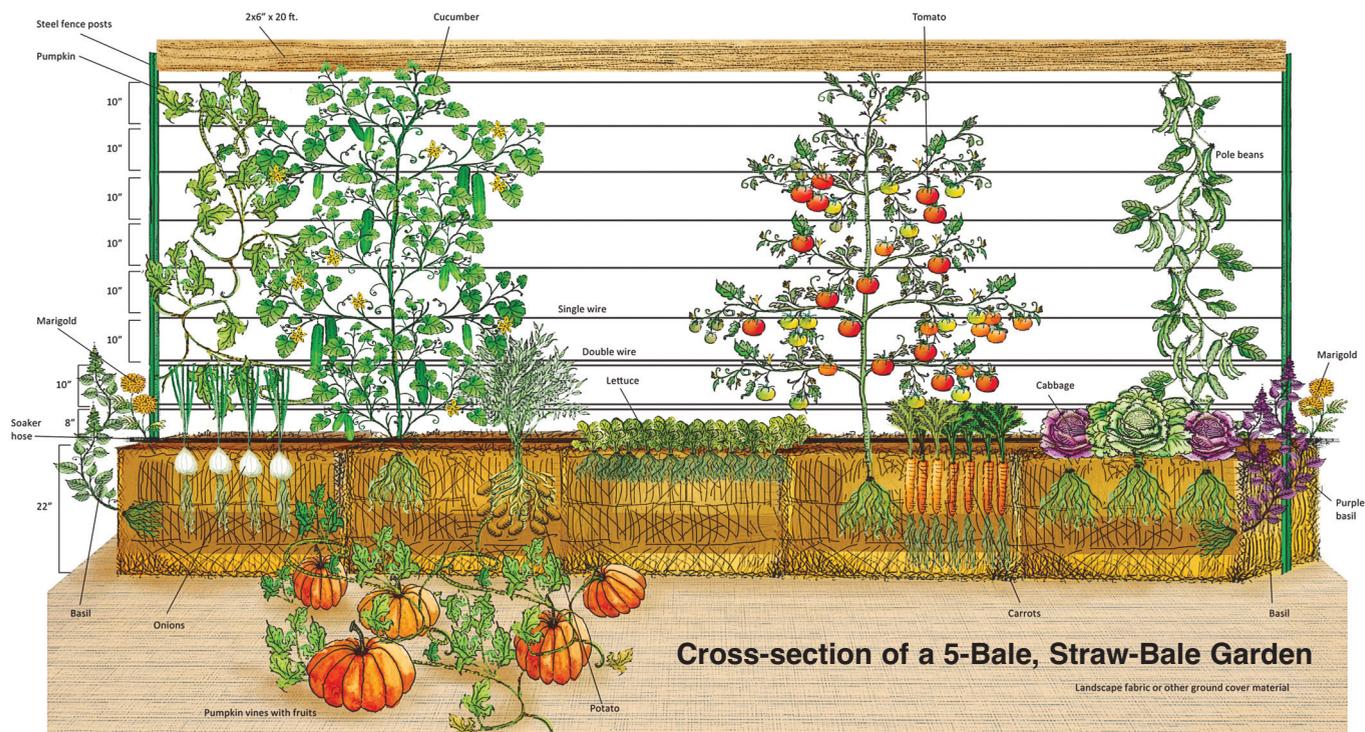
Here Are the Basics:

1. **Get straw bales** (not hay), or make your own bales, with or without straw, from garden and lawn scraps. (A whole chapter is devoted to this process.)
2. **Condition and fertilize your bales.** This takes 2 weeks. At this point, you choose to go either organic (costs more) or conventional. They both will grow the same. Inexpensive lawn fertilizer from any garden or hardware store will work for conditioning your bales. You will need approximately one pound for each bale you plan to plant on, so five pounds for five bales will suffice.
3. **Get the nitrogen right.** The three numbers on the side of every fertilizer bag are its contents analysis. Example: 29-0-4 would be 29% nitrogen (N), 0% phosphorous (P), and 4% potassium (K). Look for a lawn fertilizer with at least 20% nitrogen as it will ensure that the



bacteria in the bales are activated quickly. Make certain the nitrogen in the fertilizer you select is NOT the slow-release type. Also, do NOT use anything with herbicide, weed killers or crab grass preventer. A few of the more common organic fertilizers include bloodmeal, bonemeal, and fishmeal. All of these will work, plus many others. Bloodmeal has 12% to 15% nitrogen content, so shop around. I went to Green Thumb in Livingston or Planet Natural in Bozeman and found even higher amounts of nitrogen in seabird guano. This cooks the bales and gets it composting internally.

4. **Get the other minerals right.** Next, you will need a small bag of fertilizer that contains some phosphorous and potassium for balancing and growing the plants. I found the seabird guano had all I needed in one, but the bone-meal and fishmeal give you the (P), while your wood ashes or kelp meal are great sources of (K). Mix half wood ashes together with



Cross-section of a 5-Bale, Straw-Bale Garden

Landscape fabric or other ground cover material

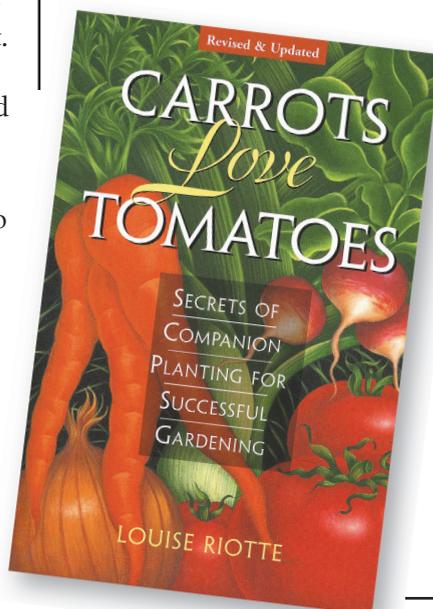
another phosphorous source to make a balanced, organic fertilizer that plants need for getting started.

5. **Set up your watering system.** You can either hand water, or use soaker hoses, or get a drip system with regularly spaced emitters that will last many years. A hose with a timer on the end lets you water while at work or on vacation.
6. **Set up an optional trellis for climbing varieties and plastic for the greenhouse effect.** Since the bales produce heat you can cover your bales and extend the growing season.
7. **Plant!** Set your seedlings in directly or plant seeds in two inches of weed-free, bagged soil—that's where the no-weeding comes in! I will continue to use my other favorite gardening book, *Carrots Love Tomatoes: Secrets of Companion Planting for Successful Gardening*, by Louise Riotte, to get the most

out of my straw bale garden.

Discover more about Karsten and his revolutionary methods at StawBaleGardens.com, where you'll find a ton information and answers to all of your questions.

I have 12 bales in my backyard—that says I'm game! And after the growing season, they will still be used for their original purpose of mulching



and “lasagna gardening” for next year. (For those new to this term, “lasagna gardening” has nothing to do with the Italian pasta treat! It's a no-dig, no-till, organic gardening method that results in rich, fluffy soil with very little work from the gardener. It refers to a method of building the garden by adding layers of organic materials that will “cook down” over time, resulting in rich, fluffy soil.)

So kick back and enjoy this gardening season with straw bale gardening—this easy and bountiful approach that has inspired creativity and made the idea of growing food in straw a reality for so many. ■

Marlenea La Shomb is a freelance writer on natural-health topics and the originator of the Brain Gym Circuit. She lives in Emigrant, MT. She is a massage therapist and a holistic-health practitioner. Would you like to share your gardening ideas with Marlenea? Feel free to call her at (406) 224-5425.