HAY BALE GARDENING

Not much space to garden?  
No tools or don’t wish to toil at turning soil to bed and add organic matter?

Consider this:

In the late 70’s, Dr. Gary Wade (Clay Counties 1st Horticulture Agent) demonstrated how to use a non-traditional approach to vegetable gardening – growing in bales of old, rotting hay, rather than in the ground, resulting in several positives!

★ Each season you can start anew so diseases will not build up from one season to the next.
★ Generous amounts of organic matter is continually supplied to the crop helping to hold nutrients & water more efficiently leading to more rapid growth.
★ With vegetables growing high above the ground, the need to hill-up is unnecessary while good drainage is assured.
★ The need to weed is essentially non-existent

Here’s how to do it – give it a try!!**

★ Start with a clean bale of hay. Hays (such as alfalfa or wheat straw) that are higher in nitrogen may give better results but this has not been studied so use any rectangular baled hay – pine needle bales do not work well.
★ Place the bale in full sun (vegetables need at least 6 hours of full sun each day to produce well) two weeks before you want to plant your vegetables.
★ Don’t remove the rope/twine that holds the bale together. So that the bale doesn’t fall apart as the rope rots, drive stakes in at each end of the bale to hold it together.
★ Water the bale thoroughly once or twice a day for 3 days.
★ On the 4th day scatter evenly 2 cups of dolomite lime and ½ cup of ammonium sulfate over the top of the bale and water.
★ On days 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, again evenly scatter ½ cup of ammonium sulfate over the top of the bale and water it in. Do not apply more
lime! The ammonium sulfate activates rot bacteria and speeds composting.

★ On day 10 apply 1½ cup of 8-8-8 or 1 cup 10-10-10 & water.

★ By day 11, the bale should be ready to plant. Mix what’s sold as bagged “Potting Soil” with “composted” cow manure if you can find it (also sold at some Garden Centers in bags). Fresh manure should not be used – it would be full of weed seeds. A 1 to 1 mix is ideal. Put 4 inches of this mix on top the bale and wet it slowly with a fine spray (don’t let it wash off the bale).

★ Plant Tomato or Pepper plants (not seed) into the bale using your hand to pull apart some of the rotted hay just under the top soil layer. A bale should accommodate 2 tomato plants or 4 pepper plants. For the Spring Garden this should be done sometime from March 1st to 15th to give your plants the longest time to grow before summer comes on. For a fall garden, plant the last week of August.

★ Squash and cucumbers can be successfully grown using this method. Best success is achieved if young plants are set into the bale, rather than seed. Try other vegetables if you want to experiment. Corn, Okra & other tall vegetables don’t root deeply enough into the hay to stand upright well.

★ As your crop grows toward maturity, give it ½ cup of 8-8-8 or 10-10-10 per month per bale. Liquid plant foods can also be used and watered over the bale, but not more than once per month. Check daily to see if the bale needs watering by sticking your finger into it. The outside may dry, but the inside needs to stay moist.

Once the season is over, remove the bale and get ready to start again the next season. This is a great technique to suggest to school teachers who want to have an outdoor garden for their class but just can’t work with the very poor soils commonly found on school ground. Give it a try this year, and please let us know what you think – Raymond Zerba, Extension Agent in Horticulture, with the University of Florida in Clay County 1/26/2010.

**The information presented here was taken almost entirely from two publications Dr. Gary Wade did on the subject – one when he was the Horticulture Agent for the University of Florida in Clay County and one when he was the Regional Horticulture Specialist with the University of Georgia out of Athens. More information can be found by going to the internet and accessing his fact sheet entitled “Hay Bales Take Stoop Out of Gardening.” Slightly modified to accommodate use of Ammonium Sulfate.**