

## Straw Bale Tomato Gardening

My interest in this process was stimulated by listening to Wisconsin Public Radio's show "Garden Talk". It seems like for about the last three years they have been talking about planting gardens in straw bales and I thought it would be fun to try.

I had two reasons why I wanted to see if I could make this process work. First is that I have only one location in my yard where sun loving tomatoes have a chance, but you're not supposed to plant tomatoes in the same location year after year. I figured if I used straw bales I could clear away the old straw after the season and next year plant new bales in the same place. Second, because we have many trees, my garden is pretty shaded and shade tomatoes are hard to grow. I thought the extra height the straw bales would provide would get my tomato plants higher where they would receive more sun.

I got my bales right around the first of the year and left them out in the weather to start to condition. You really want the bales to start breaking down by the time you plant your tomatoes so it's good to get an early start. Two weeks before I planned to actually plant the bales I started watering them daily and adding some compost every other day. Then just a couple of days before planting I added some fish meal and wood ash to the bales and watered that in thoroughly. By this time the straw was starting to decompose which is the ideal condition for planting.



These two photos show the bales as I placed them on my raised bed gardens. I put tomato cages on top and did some extra reinforcing with bamboo (which I grow). As an experiment I covered the one set of bales with plastic to see if that would speed up decomposition and then act as a greenhouse when I planted the seedlings.

I start my own plants from seed and I had timed it so the plants could be put in the straw around the first of May. That's a couple of weeks early for our zone, but as the decomposing straw was generating heat I thought it would be OK, especially with the plastic covered bales.



The discoloration on the top of the bales is a combination of the compost I had put on them and the start of decomposition.



By May 7<sup>th</sup> I had planted both the protected bales and the open bales and my little tomato plants were settling in and starting to grow a bit.



And, of course, we had a late frost warning so I needed to protect everything with Walls-of-Water which are the green items sitting on the top of the bales. The tender seedlings are protected by the water contained in the walls of these covers, but the tops are open so the plants won't cook during the day. By this time I had taken the plastic cover off the one set of bales because it was getting too hot during the day.



By May 30<sup>th</sup> the seedlings had grown way above the Wall-of-Water covers and were starting to bloom. I actually left the Wall-of-Water protection on too long and it was a real chore to get them off without damaging the tomato plants.



By the second week of June fruit was setting. On the left are some of the early Sun Sugar cherry tomatoes and on the right is the first of the Beefsteaks.



A couple of weeks later we have lots and lots of green tomatoes. Just for variety I have the Beefsteak on the left and the Sun sugar on the right.

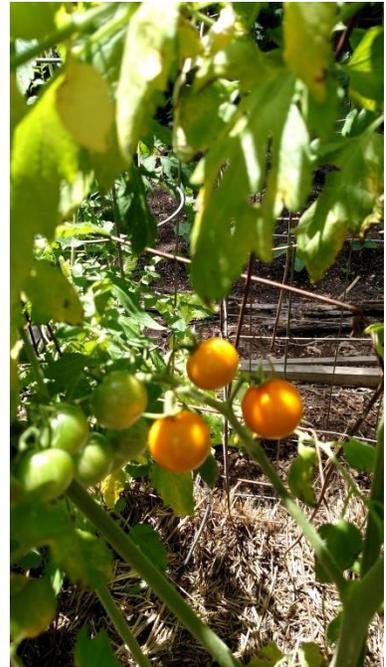


By the end of June the tomato plants were growing beyond the cages and I was happy that I had reinforced with the bamboo.

You will also notice that I had seeded some Kale at the base of the bales just to make the garden look a little better.

You can also see that the Wall-of-Water protectors are gone.

By July 9<sup>th</sup> we had our first ripe Sun Sugars.



We harvested the first Beefsteak July 18<sup>th</sup> and had BLT's for dinner.