

Straw Bale Gardening with the Melnikoffs

By Sherrie Kvamme, of the Hells Canyon Journal

There could be a straw bale shortage in the immediate years to come as gardeners learn more about the benefits of straw bale gardening. If you're a farm kid, straw bales mean bedding, cleaning up after, stacking on hot, summer days and, in general, work. But if you're a gardener, straw bales can take on a whole new purpose with a myriad of benefits.

Bill and Tonya Melnikoff of New Bridge have already started their straw bale garden. Bill said he had been reading about it and noted there are videos and information available on the internet.

"I started with the idea of building raised gardens this year, but the cost of what I would need was more than I wanted to invest," he explained. "For three, it would have cost me \$221.00 to build them myself, and we need more than that. So for \$115.00 I bought 21 bales. I was going to make 24 raised beds and that would have cost me \$1,600.00. So we're going to try them this year. In the fall, we can rototill the straw into the ground and that will make nice compost."

Bill explained that before you can plant the bales, you have to treat them.

"You spread one-half cup of 46 percent nitrogen per bale and soak it down every day and every third day, spread another one-half cup of nitrogen on them and in about 12 days they should be ready to plant. These are nice and brown inside and decomposing. We're planting today," said Bill. "We'll go down about six inches, fill it with potting soil, put seed in and potting soil over it."

When asked if he was going to put in an automatic watering system or soaker hose, Bill laughed. "No! We have to have something to do. We aren't going to sit inside in air-conditioning while timers turn the water on and off. We have to get out in the sunshine and have something to do!"

Bill said he was going to put three plants of squash in a bale and probably only two zucchini.

"We're putting about three rows per bale for carrots and things like that. It will be easy to care of our winter supply. I'll rototill between the bales and keep the ground around them cleaned up. And I'm only planting about four tomato plants this year instead of 18! We had so many tomatoes, and you can't give them away around here!"

The Melnikoffs' fruit orchard is in bloom, and Bill is expecting a good crop.

"I put lights on the trees a few days ago as the weather was calling for 34 degrees. It was a good excuse to lighten up the yard," he chuckled. "The almond tree out back was pretty! It's pure pink blossoms and I put orange lights on it. If the temperature stays like this, we should have produce popping up in these bales before a couple of weeks. It will be growing in some pretty rich medium. We'll have to wait and see."

Bill plans on building at least one raised bed for next year's asparagus.

And are they going to have strawberries? "No," said Bill. "I don't think so."

Tonya interjected, "Oh, yes we are!"

Bill smiled, "I guess we are!"

The concept of straw bale gardening was the inspiration of Joel Karsten, an author, lecturer and pioneer in the technique. His strongest credentials came from his years of experience as a Minnesota farm kid. An excerpt from his book reads:

"Straw Bale Gardens came about sort of by accident. As any kid who grew up on a farm like me can tell you, straw bales are everywhere, especially if you raise livestock. It's a valuable commodity, and it consumes a lot of a farm boy's summer. Stacking straw bales on a bale rack, then stacking bales, and then stacking more bales was a job that never seemed to end. It starts from the moment a farm kid is big enough to lift a bale of straw and smart enough to stack the rack securely to avoid a rack disaster. In fact, one coming-of-age moment in farm life happens the first time you are trusted to stack bales on a rack by yourself. If your rack makes it to the barn without spilling any bales, you are one step closer to becoming a farm man."

"Once straw is dried and racked, it must be put into dry storage quickly. Wet bales are worthless for bedding because they will never fully dry out. So when a rogue bale would tumble off the rack unnoticed in transport and eventually be rained upon, there was no point in doing anything with it but leaving it alone. Within a few weeks those bales would begin to turn gray, and a few sprouts would emerge from the thistle seeds that floated over in the wind. The thistles would bloom and grow into some of the tallest, healthiest plants on the farm. After years of watching this happen, inspiration struck, and the original seed for Straw Bale Gardening was planted in my mind."

"Leaving the farm and heading for my four-year vacation at the University of Minnesota came with lots of perks. I started to miss having a garden. Although I'd run a business doing landscaping for my professors, the growing experience wasn't complete without a vegetable garden. I longed for the fresh produce from Grandma's garden that I'd grown up with. So when I bought my first house and discovered that the soil was all heavy clay and construction backfill, I was disappointed. With little money available to spend on major soil modifications, I almost gave up on having a vegetable garden. But then I remembered those straw bales with the big healthy thistles growing taller than me, and I decided to do some experimenting."

"I ran my 'new idea' involving the use of decomposing straw bales as a substrate for growing vegetables past several of my old professors. They were unimpressed. So I called my dad for some encouragement. I asked him if he thought the idea had merit and he simply said, 'Well, let's try it. What'll it hurt?' The following weekend I drove out to the family farm. Dad had scrounged up a whole rack stacked full of beautiful straw bales. I wanted to start small, maybe with a couple of bales, but he insisted that you couldn't learn much with a couple of bales. Instead, he said, we needed to run some trials using many different methods. So we laid out around 50 bales and got started planting."

Karsten hosts a Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/learn2growstrawbalegardens>) filled with pictures, lessons, webinars and conversation about straw bale gardening. His book, *Straw Bale Gardens* (Cool Springs Press, 2013), available at Amazon and most bookstores, explains the simplicity and benefits and necessary details of gardening with straw bales.

We're invited back to the Melnikoffs' place as the summer progresses, to hear what they are learning in their first year as straw bale gardeners and to see firsthand how produce grows in straw bales. Stay tuned!



Bill and Tonya Melnikoff of New Bridge / Hells Canyon Journal photo

Pine Eagle Happenings

Eagle Valley Days will be Saturday, June 18. The event will kick off with a parade at 10 a.m. in downtown Richland. Then on to opening ceremonies at the grange park and kids games. There will be art in the park and there are still vendor spaces available at \$5 per space. Crafty people, antiques, collectables, chabby chic and other sellable items can be part of this event by calling 893-6292 to reserve a space. There will be a pie auction at 1:30 with great prizes. Bring pies to the grange kitchen by noon. The kitchen will open in the park at 11 a.m. with burgers, hot dogs, nachos and shortcake. Music and entertainment will begin at 2 p.m. Call 893-6292 or 893-6026 for more information.

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- ### Across

1. ___ Wednesday
4. Vials
10. Business firm, abbrev.
14. ___-eyed
15. Springy?
16. Aces, sometimes
17. Large bamboo trumpet
19. Impose, as a tax
20. "Cogito ___ sum"
21. Stir up, in a way
22. Crude group?
23. Come in again
25. Hyperbolic sine, mathematics
26. Conductor Koussevitzky
27. Branch
30. ___ lily
31. Couch
34. Air force heroes
35. Told on (hyph)
39. "Buona ___" (Italian greeting)
40. Baseball Hall-of-Famer Duke
41. Half a matched set
42. Abbr. after a comma
43. Depth charge
- ### Down

1. Common venomous vipers
2. Evening party
3. Gardening tool
4. "___ Maria"
5. Combine
6. Former
7. Annul
8. Golden Triangle country
9. ___ gin fizz
10. Enormous
11. Type of swimsuit (hyphenated)
12. Even
13. Deranged people
18. Percussion instrument
24. Makeup, e.g.
27. Heirloom location
28. Go through
29. Allocate, with "out"
32. "... or ___"
33. Camping gear
35. Stay dry
36. Bug
37. Adorned, in a way
38. "How ___"
39. Digging tools
44. Boys in the 'hood
45. "The Wizard of Oz" prop
46. Cause of hereditary variation
47. Afternoon service (2 wds)
49. Cuff
50. Article of faith
52. Algonquian Indian
53. Bridge site
54. Mosque V.I.P.
58. Driver's lic. and others