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Fight the curse of New England: Garden in hay bales

By PETER TONGE
The Christian Science Monitor

GREENWOOD, Maine — After the bulldozers had cleared the trees for a garden site alongside our cottage here, I learned firsthand why New England farmers packed up in droves and headed for the Midwest a century ago.

It wasn't merely the paper-thin layer of topsoil, disappointing as that might be; far more disheartening was the number and size of rocks that lay barely inches apart immediately below the surface.

Digging the first moderate garden bed took the better part of a morning. And with every rock removed, the hay-bale culture of Europe seemed more appealing.

If English commercial growers could plant tomatoes directly into bales of hay indoors on the concrete floors of greenhouses, then surely I could raise them outdoors on stony Maine soil. The no-digging aspect was too appealing to ignore.

Building the hay bale garden beds was relatively simple, and we were able to have a far larger garden last year than we would have by simply gardening the conventional way.

The hay bales were a most successful experiment, too — my wife rated it our most productive garden yet. Along with the tomatoes, the cucumbers and the winter and the summer squash produced in amazing quantities, though the potatoes yielded in more moderate quantities.

Some people have made hay gardens by spreading 6 inches of soil on top of the bales before

holes in the bales 3 to 4 inches wide and about 12 inches deep. Place fertilizer in the bottom of the hole and fill it with a rich garden loam. I used Ringer's biological vegetable fertilizer in the hole and topped it with a compost-soil mix. In effect I made vertical soil columns in the hay bale to support the seedlings until they started drawing nutrients from the decaying hay.

Most experts recommend that two to three weeks elapse between making the hay bale bed and planting. This is to give the composting a head start and is the preferred way to go.

I didn't have the time for this luxury, so I sowed the seeds and set out the tomatoes right away, with no noticeable, adverse affects. Possibly this was because I used a slow-acting nitrogen fertilizer on the bales. Fresh manure or blood meal might have sparked a more vigorous reaction in the bales, making them too hot for the seedlings during the first two to three weeks.

Initially I had to water the hay bale garden more frequently than the adjacent conventional bed, because the hay drained so rapidly. But after about four or five weeks, the decaying hay absorbed and held water readily. Moreover, by this time some of the roots of the plants had moved into the soil below the hay — soil that remained consistently moist. At the same time, the roots were still able to draw on the nutrients as they leached down from the composting hay.

In any event, during some hot dry weeks in August it was notice-

Lights for raising seedlings

Recently a reader asked why the wax begonias she had been growing under lights were not doing very well. She had a very dark guest room that was used fairly often and she thought that a few blossoming plants under lights would help make it cheery and more welcoming.

I thought the begonias were a lovely idea, but this gardener did not realize that plants grown under lights have special needs. First, flowering houseplants really need to have full spectrum fluorescent lights, the kind of tubes that give off a purplish light because they provide light at the red end of the spectrum which is necessary for bloom.

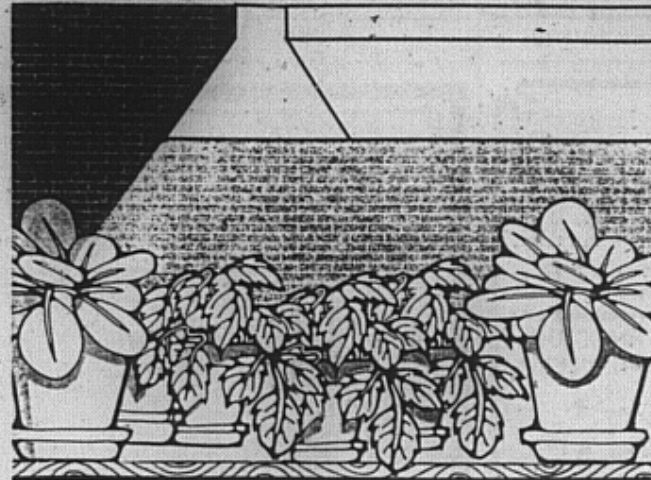
Second, she had the lights held about a foot above the plants. It is very important that lights be only about four to six inches above your plants.

Third, it turned out that she didn't always remember to turn the lights on. She knew that she couldn't leave the lights on, that the plants needed to rest, but she wasn't aware that they required between 14 and 16 hours of light a day. This problem is easily solved by using an automatic timer.

Fluorescent lights can add a new dimension to your gardening whether you use them with houseplants, or to start seedlings indoors.

You can buy elaborate floor units with several shelves and banks of lights, smaller table models or you can build your own. Fluorescent light tubes are more expensive than incandescent bulbs but they last at least 12 times as long and they cost less to operate.

Fluorescent bulbs provide light without excess heat and if you are going to use lights only for starting seeds, you need only regular cool



Recorder graphic/Pat Allen

Pat Leuchtman

Between The Rows



white fluorescent tubes. This type of fluorescent tube is less expensive than the full spectrum, grow lights, but will provide sufficient light for seedlings. If you build your own set up, you might want to consider using two or three 40 watt tubes set six inches apart under a reflecting canopy. This will enable you to use wide shelves holding a larger number of seed flats.

Whether you are buying or building a unit, it's important to make sure the lights can be raised as the seedlings grow. The intensity of the light varies and the ideal is to keep the lights between four and six inches above the tops of the seedlings.

The advantage to starting seeds under lights, instead of on the windowsill, is that you have more control over the intensity of the light and therefore the sturdiness of the seedlings. They will grow straight up towards the light instead of leaning towards the window with a tendency to become leggy especially if there are a few cloudy days when the light is not bright enough.

Along with proper light, proper watering is vital to starting seeds

successfully. If you have ever had trouble with over or underwatering seedlings, Agrosoke root watering crystals are now available.

These polymer crystals are fine, white, free flowing granules that can absorb 30 to 40 times their own weight in water. They swell and form sticky, gel-like beads providing a tiny water reservoir for plants. Agrosoke crystals should be mixed with potting soil or seed starting medium. This will assure an even distribution of plant available moisture. Plant roots actually attach themselves to the crystals so that the beads become a part of the plant, setting up a permanent feeding system. The end result is an even and greatly increased production of feeder roots.

Agrosoke has a neutral PH and will not break down in soil, regardless of additives or freezing. I haven't seen these crystals in many places but you can get a ten ounce package (enough to mix with soil for 100 six inch pots) from Brookstone for \$14.95.

Whether you use the newest equipment, techniques and supplies or some milk cartons on the windowsill, it's fun to start your own seedlings. You get to choose your own favorite varieties of flowers and vegetables, and aren't limited by the selection at the nursery. You also get to shorten winter — at least a little bit.

Sources: Your local garden center or Brookstone Company, 127 Vose Farm Rd., Peterborough, NH 03468; Burpee Seeds, Warminster, PA 18974; Mellinger's, 2310 W. South Range Rd. North Lima, OH 44452-9731; Park Seed Co., Cokesbury Rd., Greenwood, S.C. 29647-0001.

Apple tree pruning is best done in early spring