

A GUIDE TO CREATING A NO-TILL GARDEN WITH SHEET MULCHING

Plan ahead for next year's garden by sheet mulching in the fall!

What is sheet mulching?

Sheet mulching has many names and variations. The basic idea is *constructing* rather than *disrupting* the soil. Instead of tilling or digging the soil and incorporating compost, sheet mulching builds the soil on top of what is already there. This process more closely mimics nature's soil building processes.

Follow these steps:

1. Cut down grass or weeds.



2. Add layer of newspaper at least 10 pages thick and overlapped by at least 6 in. to smother grass and weeds. If day is windy, wet newspaper to keep it from blowing away.



3. Create a layer of mulch using whatever organic materials are available to you. Some ideas are: grass clippings, non-animal food scraps, unfinished compost, leaves, and yard waste.



There is no one way to sheet mulch. Be creative!

4. You can create paths if you would like, using overlapped sheets of cardboard. Overlap the cardboard with the

Benefits

- * Builds soil over time rather than the short-term flood of nutrients brought to the surface through tilling.
- * Recycles materials that you already have
- * Mulching keeps soil warm and shaded
- * Creates a bed with a spongy consistency, perfect for young roots



newspaper in the bed. Lay a thick layer of bark mulch or woodchips on top of the cardboard.



5. In the spring, start plants directly into mulch after brushing aside straw. To sow seeds you may have to add a thin layer of compost in order to achieve good consistency for germination.

Basic guidelines for mulch

- The combination of mulch layers should be a foot or two deep. (This layer will settle with the weight of winter snow)
- Think about ways to keep the mulch from blowing away. You could top the bed with thickly matted straw or leaves.
- Avoid using woody material that won't break down by springtime, ie. Use a thin layer of wood shavings rather than wood chips
- The carbon to nitrogen ratio should be about 30:1, the same as in any typical compost pile. This ratio is ideal for both the rate of decomposition that it generates and the quality, texture, and nutrient content of the finished compost.

For more information see www.dacres.org or [The Ruth Stout No-Work Garden Book](#) by Ruth Stout
Info sheet source: www.dacres.org

WHY USE MULCH?

by Jim Winkle, Quann Community Garden

Wondering why some gardeners use mulch on their plots? There are many reasons to use a mulch like straw, marsh hay, or shredded leaves. (Wood chips don't make a good garden mulch.)

KEEP THE WEEDS DOWN. Once you've weeded your garden, you probably don't want to spend that much time weeding again. Putting a mulch down greatly reduces the need to weed your garden. Weeds that do poke through are easier to pull as the ground stays loose and moist (more on that below). Weeds compete with your plants for soil nutrients; help the good guys win!

RETAIN SOIL MOISTURE AND MODERATE SOIL TEMPERATURE. While it generally rains a lot in the spring, it can go weeks in the summer without raining at all. Mulch will greatly help the soil retain water, since it won't evaporate as easily. The deeper you pile it, the more moist it will stay. During dry periods minerals are not as available to plants; keeping the soil moist solves that problem. In addition, mulch helps to regulate soil temperature. This is especially important for shallow-rooted plants. An added bonus: earthworms love a moist environment, and will multiply. They're good for the soil because they help loosen it up, and their castings are food for your plants.

PREVENT THE SOIL FROM BEING COMPRESSED. When it rains, it can come down with brutal force. This compresses the soil, which makes it harder for tender young roots to penetrate. Also, root crops like potatoes and carrots like loose soil since they need to displace a lot of dirt. (For these same reasons, it's a good idea to avoid walking in your garden when it's muddy.)

INHIBIT VEGETABLE ROT. Cucumbers and other vegetables that touch the ground can partially rot. Put a little mulch under the cuke, and it will be happier. It's best not to mulch a whole area where viney things grow; they often need to put down roots along the vine, and this will be hard to do if the whole area is mulched.

WINTERIZE YOUR GARDEN. OK, it's a little bit early to be thinking about this, but some perennials like strawberries need a four to six inch blanket in late November to keep them from getting too cold, and/or to prevent premature thawing in the spring. Mulch carrots, parsnips, and leeks and you can harvest them partially into winter!

Look at the soil in a woods, which has leaves as a natural mulch. It's dark, rich, moist, cool, loose, and full of worms; all things we're trying to attain by using mulch in our gardens. The soil life is fed in an ongoing, slow release way that helps the smaller organisms that build and maintain soil aggregate structure as well as providing additional organic matter as it is incorporated by worms.

Two to three bales is about how much is needed per plot, depending on whether you mulch your paths and how deep you pile it. According to UW Extension publication A3383, mid to late June is a fine time to apply your mulch. Applying it too early to heat-loving plants can slow their growth. In the meantime, keep it dry by covering bales with plastic, or mold will grow in it.

This information pertains to organic mulches. Synthetic mulches like plastic or landscape fabric share some of these benefits, and have some of their own.