

SHEET MULCHING



Sheet mulching is a simple way to build healthy soil using inexpensive or free organic materials. Sheet mulching imitates natural soil building processes and allows you to recycle your existing plant material and its nutrients back into your soil. It involves placing layers of organic material on the ground where it will slowly decompose, helping to create healthy soil. Sheet mulching can be done with whatever organic materials are readily available to you, including leaves, grass, wood chips, sawdust, newspaper, cardboard, animal manure, coffee chaff, and natural fiber fabrics such as wool or cotton.

In addition to being inexpensive, it also requires far less work than building a hot compost pile. Since it is a passive system for soil building, it does take a little longer to complete. Expect a new bed created by this method to be ready in 4-6 months. This makes it a great fall project that will yield a fertile garden bed in time for spring planting. As an added benefit, this is the time of year when leaves are abundantly available, making the task of collecting the necessary materials much easier. 6 months is typically an adequate amount of time for the grass to be smothered as well.

By feeding soil organisms with organic matter, you are facilitating a surge in soil life and a diverse soil ecosystem. This improves soil health and, in turn, plant health. Hundreds of different species of soil life, from fungi to worms, will help break down the plant debris and cycle nutrients in the soil, making them available for plants.

Though sheet mulching is a definite boon for a number of applications, it is not a perfect solution for every scenario. It is not an unailing technique for eliminating some of the more aggressive noxious weeds. Bindweed, for example, is difficult to defeat with any amount of mulch. Also, since most of our native bees build their nests in the ground, mulching every inch of your space can present them with difficulty. When mulching, avoid covering active nests and consider leaving some bare ground to give these important species a place to flourish.

Good applications for sheet mulching:

- Converting lawns or weedy areas into garden beds
- Expanding existing beds
- Improving soil quality in areas with poor soil nutrient levels or compaction

How to sheet mulch:

Plan ahead to be sure you have enough materials before you begin.

1. Clear the area by mowing or slashing vegetation.
2. Loosen compacted soil with a spade or digging fork.
3. Place a 1-3" of layer of preferably high-nitrogen material such as grass clippings or manure.
4. Next, add your weed barrier layer. This could be cardboard (with tape and staples removed) or 5-10 sheets of newspaper overlapped to make a continuous barrier.
5. Now, add 1-3" of leaves, sawdust, garden trimmings, or even compost.
6. Lastly, add 1-3" of your top mulch. This can be sawdust, straw, leaves, or wood chips.

Customizing your sheet mulch:

Sheet mulching is also easily customizable to a particular task or goal. For example, if you are contending with weeds, you may want to use quite a few layers of cardboard in an area somewhat larger than where the weeds are growing. This will make it more difficult for the weeds to find a gap in the cardboard, or to creep along under the mulch and find sun instead of being smothered.

Additionally, you will want to consider a thicker layer- up to 5 inches- of wood chips in order to provide a thicker barrier.

When starting a new bed, one or two sheets of cardboard may be adequate as a base for your sheet mulch. The next layer will be your layers of organic matter, typically with some high-nitrogen material, followed by a top layer of a lighter material such as burlap, leaves, or a thin layer of wood chips.

For soil building in a space where you will plant heavier feeders like vegetables, you may add more organic matter (compost, leaves, coffee grounds, weed-free plant debris) before putting cardboard down. Then, for your top layer, using burlap or leaves instead of wood chips will make it easier to remove excess material when you are ready to plant.

Materials to avoid:

- Material from persistent noxious weeds such as knotweed, quackgrass, or bindweed
- Weeds that have gone to seed
- Insect or disease infested plant material
- Pet waste
- Food waste
- Synthetic materials such as most carpets (wool and cotton carpets make a great bottom layer.)

Certified Organic Soil Products

Bulk

- Bailey Compost, www.baileycompost.com, (360) 568-8826
- Cedar Grove Composting, <https://cedar-grove.com>, (877) 764-5748
- DirtExchange, <http://dirtexchange.us>, (206) 599-3478
- Sky Nursery, www.skynursery.com, (206) 546-4851
- Yelm Earthworm & Castings Farm, www.yelmworms.com, (877) 339-6767

Bagged

- Black Gold OMRI certified products – available at local retail stores including Fred Meyer
- Cedar Grove Compost & Potting Soil - available at local retail stores
- Zoo Doo compost. Call the ZooStore at (206) 548-1535 to check for availability.

To Find local sources of arborist chips, organic straw bales, cardboard or burlap bags:

Garden Hotline, gardenhotline.org, (206) 633-0224, help@gardenhotline.org

