

MULCHING



Mulch is a protective cover spread over exposed soil. This enhances conditions for root growth and activity of soil organisms. These incorporate organic mulches into the soil to provide nutrients for plants.

The effect of mulching is to cover the soil and so protect it from:

- The impact of raindrops
- Temperature variations
- Wind erosion
- Drying winds and sun
- Suppresses weed growth



SOME USEFUL MULCHES

<u>Type of Mulch</u>	<u>Remarks</u>
Straw Leaves Sawdust (untreated) Newspaper	These are predominately cellulose (plant fibre) and are broken down to humus initially taking nitrogen from the soil. Use a nitrogen source such as blood and bone, manure or seaweed with mulch. Sawdust may form a moisture barriers. Dampen sawdust or leaf mulch to avoid them blowing about. All are good sources of humus.
Compost	A mulch or organic material partially broken down to humus. Nutrients present are readily available to the young plants. It can be used in contact with young plants. Also the dark colour absorbs heat and so promotes earlier warming to the soil.
Grass, Weeds, crop residue	A useful way to dispose of lawn clippings, small quantities of weed and crop residue, but avoid spreading clippings too thickly.
Stones	Stones act as a good heat store and so regulate soil temperature by releasing heat at night.
Earth	Surface hoeing decreases moisture loss.
Silver foil	Appears to discourage aphids and white butterfly
Black polythene	Absorbs heat, prevents weed growth and retains moisture but stops air circulation to the soil. It is also a favoured home for slugs and becomes brittle with age.

HOW TO MULCH:

Mulches are laid on top of the soil or vegetation.

CLEARANCE MULCH

A clearance mulch is used to get rid of plants, such as grass or weeds. You lay down the mulch and then leave it until the plants are dead. Perennial weeds such as couch grass will take longer to kill than annual weeds like groundsel.

It is ideal where you are breaking in a new, weed-infested plot of land, or where you have more land to use than you currently need and want to avoid it becoming covered in weeds.

Black polythene works well, but will eventually rip and blow away. Thick pieces of old carpet or sacking are good too, but some weeds (couch!) will grow right through it. Woollen carpet will eventually rot down, so any surviving plants will then grow through it. Artificial fibre carpets will last for a very long time, and can be re-used. Do not use carpets made of mixed natural and artificial fibres, as when they rot you will get lots of bits of artificial fibre left.

FEED MULCHES

A feed mulch is used to supply nutrients to the soil and protect the soil surface from damage by sun, wind and rain. It is laid as a thin layer around particular plants (like fruit bushes) or as a thin layer over the soil.

Any dead vegetable matter that you might have put in the compost heap can be used as a feed mulch (but not things that need heat to kill them, such as weed seeds and perennial weeds). You can also grow plants specially for mulching, like comfrey, whose deep roots draw up minerals into its leaves, which can be harvested several times through the summer.

DEEP/SHEET MULCHES

Deep/sheet mulches can be used to build soil. Crops like potatoes can be grown in them and are easily harvested. They also bury weeds and their seeds, and perennial weeds can easily be ripped out of them.

These mulches are usually built up in layers, and care is taken to make sure that minerals are balanced in them so that they rot down quickly and leave behind a rich, balanced soil. For a new, weed-infested plot, you might use layers of cardboard/newspaper, vegetable matter and manure.

If you draw back the mulch in one spot, place a seed potato on the soil surface and put the mulch back, you will end up with lots of tubers on the soil surface, and just need to draw back the mulch again when it's time to harvest.

