

“Planning Ahead – Sheet Mulching”

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Most gardening experts and books encourage thoughtful planning to get the most out of landscaping projects. Despite this, I continue to fret over weed-filled patches in the yard without laying out a plan for rejuvenation. Almost always I am soon bowled over by some new ideas. With renewed energy I pull a few weeds, scatter mulch and plop in some new “heart throb” plants as though that will solve the bigger problem of an untamed garden bed.

This year’s damp spring, however, is giving the weeds the last laugh. So, if you have plantings that need some enrichment, an area you’d like to turn into a new bed or some lawn you want to replace, here’s a plan for you. It’s called sheet mulching and it seeks to mimic the organic mulch layer found on forest floors with a minimum of effort from you. Benefits include:

- Improves soil to better retain nutrients and water
- Reduces weeds
- Increases population of beneficial microbes and worms
- Gives you a new or renewed area for planting

Is there a down side? Yes, it takes time and patience.

Basically, sheet mulching is spreading layers of different materials over weeds or grass you want to suppress. Here are the basics:

- Mow or cut down weeds or grass in the area you want to plant.
- Spread ½ inch of weed-free compost over area.
- Lay newspaper, cardboard or other waste paper over compost. Overlap paper material so weeds can’t wiggle their way to the light. Preventing photosynthesis is the key to weed suppression.
- Wet paper thoroughly to kick start decomposition; soak to a depth of 5 inches.
- Add compost or manure layer, then top with about 2 inches of wood shavings or chips to give the bed a finished look while it is working.

How long does it take to work? Several months; that’s where patience comes in. You’ll know it’s finished when the layers have decomposed to where you can’t recognize the original materials and it looks and smells like fresh earth. You now have a planting area ready for your new ideas. Replace mulch periodically which

will reduce watering, fertilizing and weeding tasks. Then you can go look at those “to die for” plants again!