

Sheet Mulching: Strategy for Health Soil

By *Cathe' Fish*

Summertime! Everyone's planting. Forget digging and aching backs. Sheet mulch instead.

In the '60s, Ruth Stout came up with a no dig, less work, higher yielding garden plan. She used constant, very thick mulch (10 inches or more) on her garden beds to build excellent soil and suppress weeds. Her method saves time, labor, and water, and is more likely to be disease-free.

In Permaculture, we call this method sheet mulching and use it extensively, close to our homes in Zones 1 and 2.

Last year I redid my garden beds with sheet mulching. The results have been amazing. My fall, winter, and spring gardens have been my best--extremely healthy, despite lower than normal temperatures and three weeks with 18 inches of snow covering the vegetables.

This summer I'm finding huge fat garden worms that seem to have moved in permanently, and the soil quality has improved dramatically despite the many rocks. (My gardens are on rock terraces.) I've also noticed the soil has much better water retention.

I consider this method a fast and easy solution for keeping soil permanently alive. It works well anywhere, even on compacted soil. Here's how to do it: Don't level the ground. Don't dig. Don't weed the area. Bend over any weeds or leftover plant material.

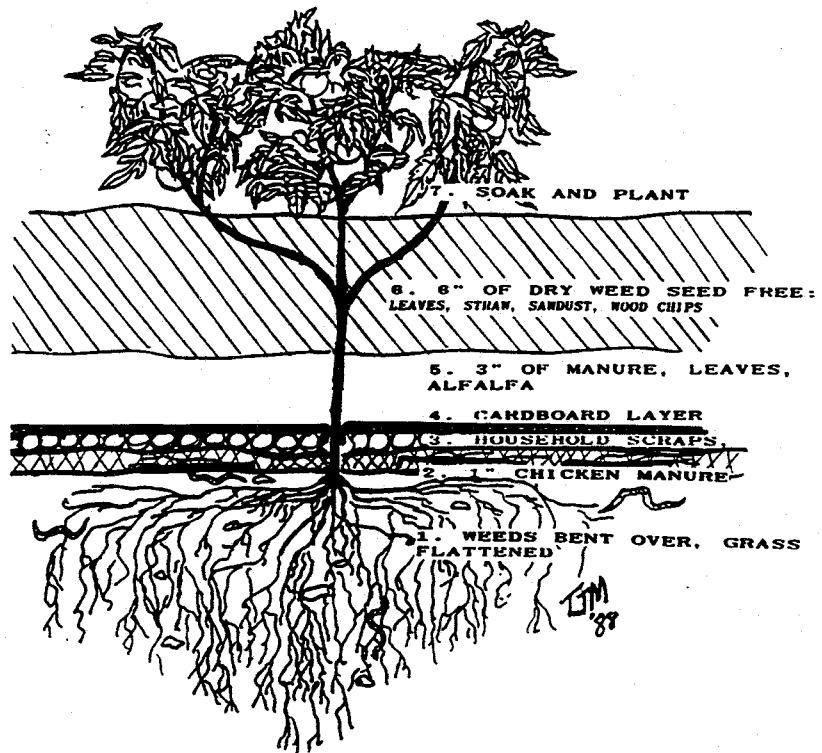
Sprinkle on some bloodmeal or bonemeal. Cover the area with one inch of chicken manure (optional). Water.

Next throw on any available household food scraps (for the worms). Add weeds, hay, straw, or anything that may have seeds at this level. Water.

Overlap completely with cardboard or four sheets of newspaper (no glossy print, especially yellow, orange, or red). If there are existing plants or trees you want to keep there, overlap up to the plant(s). Then fold newspaper up the plants (at right angles to the ground) about six inches. Water well.

Apply three inches of any mixture of the following materials, which must be as seed-free as possible: horse-stable straw, seaweed, leaves, rotted alfalfa hay, or pine needles (in alkaline soil).

Apply six inches of dry material which is free of weed seeds: leaves, straw, pine needles, old sawdust,



or wood chips (which must be left on the surface until broken down--no redwood bark).

Soak, and it's ready to plant!

To plant large seeds, tubers, small plants, and seedlings: Take a machete and cut a hole down through the cardboard. Put a handful of good soil down through the hole. Plant. Put on another handful of good soil. Pull the mulch softly to the base of the plant. Water.

To plant small seeds: Make a long slit with a machete. Fill the slit with good soil. Plant. Water. Lightly cover with mulch. Add more mulch as the plants come up.

Note: Root crops don't do well the first year because the soil is compacted. Also, there is too much manure for root crops--they'll fork out. Set up a temporary root bed until the second year.

Maintaining the sheet mulch garden: Food wastes from the kitchen are continually "tucked under" the cardboard. Any unwanted weeds, including bermuda grass, are smothered with wet newspaper and "tucked under". Occasionally, scatter a handful of bonemeal and bloodmeal, and add top mulch to keep the pile at 10 inches. Keep the mulch loose, don't walk on it, and don't let it mat.

For repeat planting: No need to rotate or rest the soil. Keep planting year round.