

ORGANIC LIVING

By

Robert Rodale

Mulching Makes Gardening Easy

All gardeners have a dream, and it goes something like this:

On the first warm day of spring, they go out into their gardens with their seeds, sow them in rows, and retire back to their houses. Then, several weeks later, they re-emerge into warm summer days to reap a bountiful harvest until the fall.

For most gardeners, it is indeed only a dream, haunting them as they crawl between rows of vegetables picking weed after weed. Or, they daydream while nursing their gardens through a drought with a garden hose.

Actually, the gardener's dream can be a reality—or almost a reality—through the use of mulch.

Mulch is nothing more than a cover of rotting material put over the ground to keep undesirable things, like weeds, from growing where they shouldn't. If a garden is heavily mulched between rows of vegetables, few weeds will grow, making the gardener's work much easier.

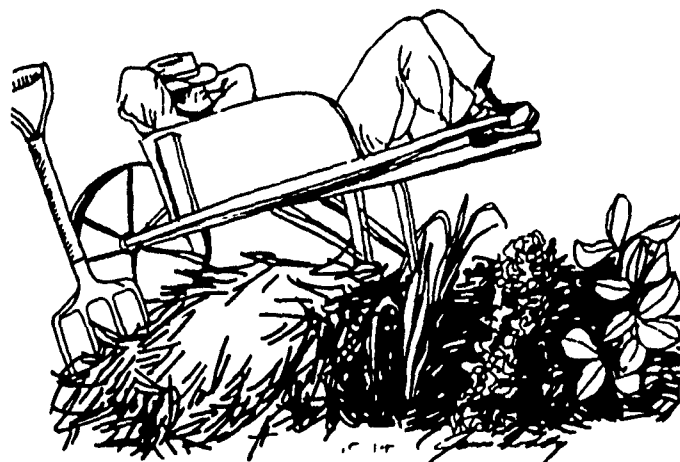
Every organic gardener, and most of those who are non-organic, have heard of Ruth Stout, the 90 year-old woman famous for her no-work method of gardening. She utilizes piles of mulch in her large garden. As a result, she does nothing at all but plant seeds and harvest crops.

Miss Stout relies upon the use of spoiled hay for her mulch. The hay, which is actually no good for livestock feed (hence the name), is harvested on her 55-acre farm located in Redding Ridge, Conn.

To plant, she says to "pull back the mulch and plant the rows by making a furrow. Keep the mulch back until the seeds are well sprouted and then tuck it back around the young plants."

Not everyone can get all the spoiled hay they need for mulch. But, there are alternatives that everyone can get. You can start collecting material right now. Put a layer of mulch down over your garden and by spring, it'll be decayed enough to add that little extra bit of humus that will give you a head start over your neighbors.

There are grass clippings and leaves. Everyone cuts



their grass during the summer. And, everyone usually rakes leaves in the fall. Simply save them and add them to your garden as mulch after the young plants poke their heads through the soil. Keep on the lookout for those plastic bags filled with grass that people are always throwing out. If your own lawn doesn't provide you with enough, your neighbors will.

Within the past few years, rolls of black plastic strips have become popular as mulch, primarily for convenience. Last year, some gardeners had problems finding it. Some turned to clear plastic and found that the use of clear plastic had a greenhouse effect, turning their mulching program into a weed problem!

Just about anything that grows can be used as mulch. If you live near a sawmill or lumber yard, why not head over there and ask for sawdust? Be sure to bring your containers with you since the owner of the operation will probably be more than happy to get rid of the material. When sawdust rots, it's an ideal mulch.

Then there's pine needles and pine bark. A growing number of municipalities are shredding Christmas trees into piles of potentially good mulch, especially for those plants that love an acidic soil. Simply bring your own baskets or boxes, and you'll be in business. And best of all, you won't have to pay a cent for it.

Using mulch can actually extend a growing season. Miss Stout doesn't harvest her root vegetables, like beets and carrots. She buries them in mulch and when she wants them, be it January or May, she just goes out into her garden, digs them up and has fresh — really fresh — vegetables all year round.

She has also developed a technique for planting potatoes right in heavy layers of mulch. When she wants those delicious, young potatoes, she brushes the mulch away from the plant, carefully lifts out the young, tender potatoes, and covers up the rest without disturbing them.

The advantages of using layers of mulch far outweigh the disadvantages, especially if you use organic materials. Along with preventing most weeds from growing (although you may have to pick a few), the mulch holds moisture. During dry spells, plants need all the moisture they can get. If you do wind up using the garden hose, you can be sure the moisture-retaining quality of mulch will do some good. The mulch will also keep the ground cool during the blistering hot months of summer,

which is especially beneficial for plants that have shallow roots.

But perhaps the most important element of organic mulch is the humus it will add to the soil when the mulch decays. With mulch, you'll never have to worry about hard-packed soil, and you can come as near to the gardener's dream as possible: the least amount of work for the greatest harvest.

(Editor's Note: The opinions appearing in "Organic Living" are those of its author, Robert Rodale, an independent columnist. Rodale's comments do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the Lancaster Farming editor or anyone on the Lancaster Farming staff.)

Soybeans Hurt Badly

The nation probably has more frosted soybeans now than anytime in history; Minnesota even had a frost on September 4. Since soybeans are late planted, in most cases, they were hurt badly with our recent frost, says James H. Eakin, Extension agronomist, The Pennsylvania State University.

A soybean plant is physiologically mature when 50 percent of its leaves have fallen. At this point the beans are somewhere between 40-50 percent moisture. From this point moisture declines very rapidly and in 1-2 weeks it drops to 10 to 15 percent moisture. Seed germination is highest at this time, but an odd thing about germination is that the seed first becomes capable of germination when only about one-third of the dry weight has been accumulated.

Research shows that soybean yield is hurt badly if all leaves are frosted or removed by hail before normal leaf drop. Soybeans defoliated three weeks before 50 percent leaf fall produced 30 percent less than those that reached maturity normally.

Can these immature soybeans be harvested or are they a complete loss? In most cases except perhaps double crop beans, they can be harvested, and probably a few days earlier than if they went through their normal growth cycle. Of great importance is a moisture tester. Start harvesting when moisture drops to 14.5

percent. The optimum range is narrow, about 12.5 to 14.5 percent. After harvest, beans are usually stored in metal bins equipped for aeration and-or drying. Supplemental heat is necessary when soybeans are stored with more than 15 percent moisture. The maximum air temperature should be the same as for corn, 130 to 140 degrees F. If the beans are to be used for seed don't let air temperature exceed 110 degrees F. Beans are not as easy to dry as corn and many growers have complained about serious cracking of the seed. Handle as little as possible after drying.

Soybeans that are simply too green and immature should be put in the silo, adds Eakin.

Growing Degree Days

Since the State has experienced frost in the past few weeks the growing degree days will no longer be reported for this season.

Temperature in Lancaster for the week ending October 7th measured an average 50 degrees or 9 degrees less than the average. Rainfall measured from April 1st has been a record 25.74 inches.

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