

GREEN LIVING

By Cile Downs

Mulch

A friend of mine once said he threw weeds on “the mulch pile.” I hesitantly suggested, “you mean the compost heap...?” and he replied “what’s the difference?” Since Green Living has defined compost, which is basically fertilizer, this one should do the same for mulch.

The two principal purposes of mulch are to hold moisture in the soil and to discourage weeds. (Some people mulch a garden for winter protection.) Therefore, unlike compost, mulch should consist of something that does not break down in a hurry. Once you put a layer of mulch between the rows of your vegetable garden, around the base of your shrubbery, perennials, etc., you want it to last a year

if possible, so you don’t have to think about it again. Salt hay is the very best mulch in a garden but is hard to come by unless you have a salt marsh handy, and is expensive to buy as are the various good-looking shredded barks. Another fine mulch is seaweed, which forms a convenient windrow on bay beaches, especially after storms. It resists decay like salt hay so it is great for permanent installations like your asparagus. Its saltiness, with asparagus, is no detriment: on other things, better hose it down or wait until it is rained on.

You can also mulch a vegetable garden with regular hay, grass clippings, straw, etc., thus forming a sort of garden-wide shallow compost heap, to which you keep adding as it disappears. This requires work and watchfulness, and if you lapse for a minute a bunch of weeds comes through the thin spots. Leaves, especially oak leaves, would work well if chopped up, but in their natural state they look sloppy and tend to blow away.



An excellent material is pine needles. I have several enormous white pines that shower down dead needles in both spring and fall. I rake this up and use it as mulch on the flower beds. It is wonderful looking, turning gradually from cream-colored to a rich russet-brown. Rain and watering percolate through it and it is fairly long lasting. You do need to own a pine tree or have a generous neighbor who has one.

The best readily available mulch for shrubs and trees is wood chips. They may last several years, stay in place, do an excellent job of keeping the ground damp, and contribute wonderful richness to the soil when they finally rot away. There used to be orange trucks that went around cutting branches away from the electric wires, and you could tip the crews to give you the chips they made along the way. Many’s the wonderful load of wood chips I obtained in this way, but you never see them any more. If you have a landscaper clear some brush, they usually have a chipper and can leave the product by your garden. The Town also occasionally makes wood chips available at the recycling center.

There is a possible problem with using chips in a vegetable or cutting garden, which is that if you change the rows around, you have the wood chips in the way, difficult to dig through and not so great dug into the soil. In the ground, they don’t become compost for a long time, and while decaying they use up nitrogen. The compromise I have arrived at is to use wood chips all around the edges and on all the paths of my vegetable garden, where they are excellent to walk on (no muddy shoes), and only need renewing annually, at most. Between the rows I put some of the aforementioned material, like hay, pine needles or clippings, that do rot away and need renewing but don’t impede planting. Every gardener figures things out in her (or his) own way.

Never under any circumstances use plastic mulch on your garden unless you intend to remove it before it starts to fall apart.

