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The Biggest Landscaping Mistake: Why Geotextile Fabric Under Mulch Is a Disaster

In the world of landscaping, few things are as frustrating as the persistent belief that geotextile fabric (often called "weed barrier" or "landscape fabric") is a good idea under mulch. It sounds like a logical solution—put down a layer to stop weeds, then cover it with mulch for a tidy, low-maintenance planting bed. Unfortunately, this approach does more harm than good.

As a landscape architect and contractor with 45 years of experience, I can confidently say: **using fabric under mulch is one of the worst things you can do for your soil and plants.**

The Fabric Kills the Soil

Healthy gardens start with healthy soil, and soil health depends on organic matter cycling back into the ground. When you lay down landscape fabric, you create a barrier that prevents leaves, decomposing mulch, and other organic material from enriching the soil. Over time, the ground beneath the fabric becomes lifeless, compacted, and as impermeable as concrete.

So instead of building rich, well-structured soil that fosters plant growth, you end up with a sterile, crusty layer of dirt that struggles to support plant life.

Water Runoff: A Recipe for Drought and Erosion

One of the biggest myths about landscape fabric is that it allows water to pass through. While some fabrics claim to be "permeable," they quickly clog with fine particles from the soil and mulch. The result? Water hits the fabric, then runs off the planting bed instead of soaking in where it's needed.

This leads to several problems:

- **Your plants suffer.** Less water reaches the roots, causing stress, especially in hot or dry conditions.
- **Erosion increases.** Without moisture penetrating the soil, your mulch is more likely to wash away into the lawn or down the street.
- **Soil compaction worsens.** Dry soil becomes hard and lifeless, making it even harder for roots to grow.

Fabric Fails at Weed Control

Despite its name, landscape fabric doesn't actually prevent weeds—it makes them worse. Here's why:

- **Weeds still grow on top.** Over time, airborne seeds land in the mulch and sprout. Since mulch is no longer breaking down into the soil, it forms a layer where weeds can thrive.
- **Weeds that break through are impossible to remove.** When a weed does manage to punch through the fabric, its roots weave into the material. Trying to pull it out usually results in breaking the weed at the surface, leaving the roots behind to regrow.

Extra Cost with No Value

Installing landscape fabric is a waste of time and money. It adds material costs, labor, and maintenance headaches without delivering any real benefits. If anything, it increases the amount of work required over time.

The only place where landscape fabric is useful? Under **crushed stone walkways** or **gravel driveways**, where it helps prevent stone from sinking into the soil. But when it comes to planting beds, it's an absolute no-go.

The Better Alternative

So what should you do instead? Here's the right approach for long-term success:

1. **Skip the fabric.** Just don't use it—ever.
2. **Use high-quality organic mulch.** Natural wood chips, bark, or composted leaves will break down over time, improving soil health.
3. **Apply 2-4 inches of mulch.** This helps suppress weeds, retain moisture, and regulate soil temperature.
4. **Replenish mulch as needed.** Over time, as it decomposes, add more to maintain the proper depth.
5. **Encourage deep-rooted plants.** The healthier your plants, the more they shade out weeds and retain moisture.

Conclusion

Landscape fabric under mulch is one of the biggest mistakes homeowners and landscapers can make. It damages soil health, prevents water infiltration, fails at weed control, and creates long-term maintenance nightmares. If you want a thriving, low-maintenance garden, ditch the fabric and focus on building healthy soil with proper mulching techniques.

When it comes to landscape fabric, **the best thing you can do is leave it on the store shelf.**