Los Alamos Community SEED LIBRARY

MULCHING FOR WINTER

BY KOKHEONG MCNAUGHTON

Every year, we lose 1% of our topsoil around the world, ten times faster than its being regenerated. In the United States alone, we are losing 3 tons per acre per year. Most of the losses are from agricultural uses, and not from climatic elements like erosion and wind. It makes sense that as gardeners, one of our priorities is conservation of topsoil in our very own little corner of the earth.

Mulching not only conserves topsoil, but also helps reduce water loss from surface evaporation, reduce competition from weed, and some mulch will increase soil fertility by adding organic matter to the soil.

In my own garden, I'm using a combination of organic, inorganic and live mulch to get the most out of our small, 5000 square feet of arable land around the house, minus the several hundred square feet of pathways. Only about half that space is devoted to growing fruits and vegetables, the rest is taken up by annual and perennial flowers (both the wild and cultivated ones) for beneficial insects, and native as well as locally-adapted shrubs and bushes including ahoneysuckles, native asters and milkweeds, wild gooseberries and a currants, and a forsythia.

My favorite kind of mulch is organic ones like leaves, twigs, shredded wood chips, straws, newspaper, cardboard, and pine-needles. Friends often ask me if using pine needles would increase the acidity of my soil. My response has always been, "It takes a hundred years for them to break down, so any pH effect is negligible." Meanwhile, they help keep moisture in the soil and create an eco-system for all kinds of insects, crustaceans, worms, fungi and soil microbes underneath.

Inorganic mulch in my garden includes gravels and rocks of different sizes. Rocks have been used by Native Americans in this area as mulch for centuries. Not only do they keep the soil underneath moist, they also absorb the sun's heat during the day and release it at night keeping plants warm. I use rocks to surround young seedlings in the spring to give them a head start and to keep me from accidentally stepping on them. Every so often, the grandkids would upturn a rock in search of crickets or creepy-crawlies for their science projects.

I also lay out cut-up old clothing and burlap sacks around the base of my fruit trees as mulch. They create ideal hiding places for earwigs and other small insects. The earwigs hide from birds during the day and come out at night to feed on aphids. This is especially helpful under my cherry tree which is susceptible to aphid infestation in early spring. The trick with earwigs, as with other insects that can be both beneficial and harmful, is to keep them confined to where they'll do good and trap them where they'll do harm.

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When we remodeled our kitchen and living room ta few years ago, I asked our contractor to save me the old carpets which I cut into strips and created several instant outdoor garden paths with them. Not only do they help keep weed and mud down, they are also permeable to air and water. Colonies of my free-range red worms have found them to be ideal hiding places from birds. I can often "harvest" these worms whenever I need them to start a new vermicompost.

Living mulch refers to cover crops that are planted for the purpose of replenishing the soil. Every year, about a third of my vegetable plots are not planted with vegetables but are planted with cover crops that enrich the soil with nitrogen, like clovers, alfalfa, and wild vetch. While they are busy replenishing the soil, they are also producing flowers for bees and butterflies. However, if not maintained properly, these cover crops can dominate other crops, so keeping them from re-seeding themselves is important.

Some people use plastic mulch to keep down weed, keep the soil warm, and conserve water. I would not recommend this method of mulching because I fear that it might affect the living organisms in the soil from lack of aeration, as well as creating microplastics in the soil and food crops.

What's your preferred method of mulching?