

BEST PRACTICES



Sheet Mulching

General considerations

- Sheet mulching is a technique to convert an area of lawn or weeds to a perennial native planting bed. It is an easy, low input method because it involves minimal digging and the existing plant material does not need to be removed.
- Sheet mulch works by cutting off light from grass and weeds so they eventually die and decompose. The area will be ready to plant approximately three to six months after application of the sheet-mulch.
- Decomposed vegetation and other materials used in sheet mulch build soil health and fertility, which will help native plants establish quicker, grow faster, and need less water.
- When applying sheet mulch, it is important to avoid gaps or tears through which weeds can grow. Avoid walking on sheet mulch while it is decomposing, which can cause tears. To reduce gaps, use the largest pieces of cardboard you can find.
- Sheet mulch works best on relatively even ground. If cardboard cannot be laid flat, weeds are likely to grow through it.
- To aid decomposition, is best to apply sheet mulch in winter or spring when the soil is wet. If applying in summer, wet the soil thoroughly before laying down cardboard/newspaper.
- Sheet mulch can be used to convert the entire lawn area or to create beds in an existing lawn. Bed edging can be used to create a cleaner look and reduce maintenance. Choose wider edging made from a durable material such as concrete or recycled rubber. Thin plastic edging will flop over and does not offer good results.
- Sheet mulch can be used around existing plants. Remove grass and other vegetation in a one-foot wide ring around each plant. Leave a six-inch gap between the base of the plant and the cardboard.
- Measure work area to calculate the amount of wood chip mulch you need.
 - $1 \text{ Volume of wood chip mulch for three inch coverage (in cubic yards)} = (\text{work area} \times 0.25) / 27$

Tools and Materials

- Cardboard with all tape, plastic, and staples removed
- Compost, lawn clippings, manure, or other weed-free fine organic material, if needed to amend poor soil (Optional)
- Wood Chip Mulch or Straw
- Bed Edging (Optional)
- Shovel
- Rake
- Wheelbarrow
- Garden Hose or Flour

Application Method

- Use a garden hose or a line of flour to trace the edge of the area you are sheet mulching. (Figure 1)
- Using a shovel, remove grass or weeds in a strip along the edge of the area. This will prevent grass from spreading into the bed once it is planted. The strip should be the width of the bed edging, or six inches wide if no edging will be used. (Figure 2 and 3)
- If working in summer, wet the ground well with a garden hose or sprinkler.
- Install the bed edging, if using.



Figure 1: Trace the edge of the area.



Figure 2: Remove grass in a strip at the edge.



Figure 3: Remove grass in a strip at the edge.

- Apply cardboard, compost and wood chip mulch over the area.
 - Flatten each box and lay it down so that there are two layers of cardboard over the entire area. Overlap the edges by six inches.
 - To avoid damaging or disrupting the cardboard, minimize the number of trips with the wheelbarrow over the cardboard.
 - Lay the cardboard down in sections starting at the far corner of the area.
 - Apply one to two inches of compost, if using, and three inches of mulch to each section before moving on to the next.
 - Repeat, working outwards to cover the entire area as if you were painting a floor.
 - To make spreading compost and chips easier, dump many small piles from the wheelbarrow rather than a few large piles.
 - Cover the grass-free strip with cardboard so that the outer edge of the cardboard is in line with the outer edge of the strip. (Figure 4 and 5)



Figure 4: Cover grass-free strip with cardboard.

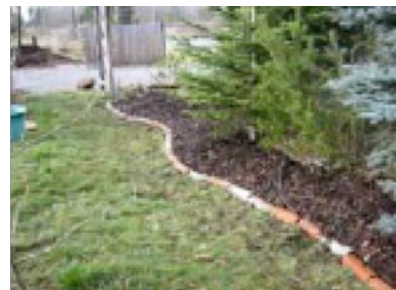


Figure 5: Finished sheet mulch.

Appendix 2. Source: OlyWild. All photos: Greg Rabourn

