# Mulch Gardening

"Nature abhors bare ground....."
Through education, observation and intuitive sense the founders at EarthVoice have successfully promoted 'No Work' gardening through extension classes and on-site demonstrations at Northern Illinois locations.
Many gardeners have been convinced that the creative process whereby humans coax nature to produce food-producing and aesthetically useful plants requires hard labor, tilling, watering, weeding and constant attention to fine details to have success. Volumes of detailed books, written by 'experts' are devoured each year on subjects of dubious use to the average gardener. In fact, the weight of detail and information displayed by most gardening books and 'experts' has convinced a great deal of busy people that they don't have the time or energy to garden at all..... quite a loss.
But, there's a great deal of good news !

Frequently Asked Questions

***How would one start with Mulch Gardening ?***

Basically the EarthVoice method of mulch gardening entails creating permanent pathways in the garden area that allow access around an area of permanent beds. After the pathways are laid out the area between the paths is 'raised' by successive 'sheet mulching' using various biodegradeable materials

***What background or history does it have ?***

Nature has, of course, created soils and lush plant growth through mulch decomposition for centuries. **Ruth Stout**, one of the people to first write about this method referred to it as the "No Work Garden." She considers digging soil or turning compost heaps a waste of energy and pointed out that the composting process occurs naturally throughout her garden as the thick mulch decomposes.

Another advocate of this natural method is **Masinoba Fukuoka,** author of "The One Straw Revolution." He claims that the best ways to garden are found by observing nature. When gardening, he uses no digging tools and returns all plant residues back to his mulch, which he keeps at least six inches deep. He states a good mulch will "suppress weeds, return moisture, encourage earthworms, shelter beneficial microbes, and enhance tilth."

***What materials does it take and how do I do it at home on a budget ?***

Some various items we've used or heard work well are animal manures, compost, corn cobs (chopped), grass clippings, hay, leaves (preferably chopped), peat moss, salt hay, sawdust (rotted for the beds), seaweed/kelp, stalks (chopped), straw and wood ashes. Once you get into the mulch mentality and you will start finding mulch materials in the most unlikely places (hops from a brewery has been reported and on and on....).

While you can go out an purchase materials part of the fun is in the creativity of the process. Such item's as natural fiber clothing and newspapers find a very important use in such a system ! We typically have found use for such non-organic materials such as plastic bag's, and roofing felt for under the walkway mulch. When a large amount of shredded wood bark came our way for paths on one job we tore open each bag and used it as weed suppression in the path directly ahead of us..

***Come on, it can't be no-work?***

Actually a better term would be low maintenance. "No-Work" refers more to the elimination of many back breaking processes (financially and literally) that are commonly associated with gardening/agricultural growing. The long-term benefit of building up permanent and successive no-till beds and returning all organic matter back to the beds ensures less work each year.

***Doesn't the soil need to be turned every so often ?***

Actually one of the worst things that we do to our soils is the constant disturbing of it' natural process. Aside from the tremendous expenditure of money, effort and time that could be more profitably spent in organic improvement let's look at several other factors:

At the point of erosion and lack of fertility that many agricultural soils have become it would, at first, seem to make sense to lift and aerate. Unfortunately this well-intentioned effort will cause a chain reaction of unintentioned things. First the soil that is tilled will be separated, in a meaningful way, from the layer below it causing what is termed 'hard pan' and drainage and other problems. Typical rototilled soils are loose only to the depth of the tiller (typically 1 foot max.) and are EXTRA hard and lifeless below that. Many plants roots will not penetrate the harder layer leaving an effect much like a container with limited depth and drainage.

Also the very critical micro and bug life that makes organic soil thrive is totally disrupted with these 'turnings' and must regenerate after such a setback.

***But my soils are mostly clay and need the rototiller! Don't they ? And what about all the weeds that are already there?***

These are precisely the soils where tillage is most damaging (see above on 'turning'). Clay-based soils are usually very rich in nutrients and need organic matter and green manure-type crops grown on them for increased tilth and drainage. Anyone building with Cob has found that lifting, wetting and repacking clay soil makes a brick-like consistency that is very difficult to penetrate.

As for what's already there a good sheet mulch will effectively 'black out' any unwanted growth leaving the weeds to rot under the soil with their roots intact (very good for the soil!)

***If the mulched soil stay's moist without watering won't it also get too wet ?***

While it is possible for any soil condition to get 'over watered' experience has shown for us that the mulches (especially straw) act as thatch roof, dispersing excess water away from the raised (key) bed. Typically heavy flooding has temporarily pooled in the pathways where it is slowly reabsorbed into the beds after the rain. Conversely open soils are pounded by rain, eroded and left flooded (very hard on many plants) quite often. If such soils are walked upon, tilled or driven upon such as in curent ag. practices the compression effect that creates hardpan is accelerated.

***If I adopt this type of gardening, what do I do with my tiller etc. ?***

Short of having a way to reuse the combustion engine to produce temporary power for pumping water, generating electricity etc. we see no need for rototillers at all. Selling them before the coming glut of used ones may be your best bet !

*Anecdotal Story*: The very first year a couple of the founders got together to garden together and had on-hand a large high-powered tiller. As 'time was of the

essence' they reluctantly decided to create (for the first year only of course!) the garden layout by tilling up the sod that covered the area..... the tire was flat, the tiller's gas was old and after a short while of cursing the beast it was decided to skip the inputs needed to put it back into action... FOREVER! If sold this fine specimen of tiller would bring enough money for many inputs of seed, mulch, truck loads of compost and still have enough left over for a hammock !

***How do I start ?***

A Generic Version (*your area will cause variations of course*): Pick out your location based upon the usual sunlight, water and other considerations. Mulch the pathways for your permanent beds using some kind of barrier preferrably under the walkway mulch. Next water and sheet mulch the beds with something like newspapers (biodegradeable and a good blackout material for weeds). Now pile on a 'lasagna' of alternating organic materials topped with a good cover mulch such as straw on top of another newspaper layer. To plant in the new beds just separate the wetted newspaper layer (under the straw for instance) with your hands, add a little dirt around the plant or place seeds and tuck the mulch back up around the plant or leave a small area exposed for germination.

Likely it will be hard to believe how little watering, weeding and work will be required to grow wonderfully healthy plants with ever-increasingly healthy soils!!!