



Mulching

Mulching is an important, though frequently neglected, gardening practice and is essential to success during hot, dry periods especially where the water supply is unreliable. It lowers soil temperature and reduces evaporation.

Although the chief reason for mulching is to conserve moisture and so greatly reduce the amount of irrigation required, mulches also keep down weed growth and maintain the surface soil in a loose, friable condition which in turn lessens the necessity for cultivation.

Large raindrops, not intercepted by vegetation, are very destructive of the structure or granular condition of the soil, but water issuing from a hose can be still more damaging. Mulches break the force of the raindrops or hose stream. Soil structure is not seriously affected by water gently percolating through the mulch and the soil's capacity to absorb water is maintained.

Mulches may be composed of a wide range of materials, but those of a loose, open character which allow moisture to penetrate readily, are generally the most satisfactory.

Improve the Soil

Of these, the organic materials are the most practicable. Most of these also improve the condition of the soil if dug in at the end of the season.

Composts, animal manures, "spent" hops, lawn clippings, straw, wood shavings and sawdust, are some of the materials which may be used to good advantage for mulching. The last three, however, are best removed at the end of the growing season and not incorporated with the soil.

Mulches with nutritive properties, such as animal manures and compost, enrich the soil slightly with the leaching from them of soluble plant foods.

Where materials suitable for application as a mulch are unavailable, a light stirring of the surface soil after irrigation to hasten drying of the surface, effects a soil mulch which helps conserve soil moisture. But in semi-arid areas, surface soil dries so rapidly that soil mulches are of little or no practical value in conserving moisture.

The disadvantage, however, of soil mulch is that the frequent cultivation necessary to maintain it may do more harm than good, particularly during the advanced stages of a crop's development, because of injury to the root system.

All vegetables could be mulched to some advantage but preference might be shown to crops with the greatest exposure of soil surface between rows, shallow rooted crops and those which require most water.

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Choose your weapons. An excellent sketch by talented Les Franks, of Cobargo