

Lasagna Gardening

by Heather Edon, UCCE Master Gardener of Calaveras County

Lasagna anyone? Your garden says a resounding "Yes, please!"

"Easy" and "gardening" don't usually go together for most people; but what if I told you they can!

Many people find the digging and turning of the soil to be the most problematic aspect of gardening. When gardens don't produce well, it may be because the soil is too hard to allow access to the available nutrition, for example, the clays here in

Calaveras County. Well, here's the solution to all our gardening woes: Lasagna Gardening, also known as Sheet Composting or Sheet Mulching. The most difficult part of this gardening method with multiple names is waiting for nature to do most of the work for you.

In Lasagna Gardening we build the soil just like we prepare a lasagna, one layer at a time; then we let nature complete the soil enrichment for us. You can spread the process out over time and build one layer one day and another the next, or lay all the layers in one sunny afternoon. While fall is the best time to put down these layers or sheets of different compostable components, this process can be continued throughout the seasons. When you install sheet mulch in the fall, rains help the soil to be broken down and rebuilt naturally all winter while you watch the plants grow!

In addition to building rich fertile soil, Lasagna Gardening or Sheet Mulching/Composting also helps conserve the moisture in the soil, which in turn conserves water. You are reusing materials that are probably landfill bound, requiring energy to recycle there; instead, nature does it on your rocky ground! This method is more efficient than composting which requires the labor of turning the materials frequently, and loses more of the available nitrogen that the soil sorely needs. Lasagna Gardening builds soil faster than planting a cover crop, (nitrogen fixing legume or deep rooted plant to build your soil). So are you ready to grab your fork and shovel and enjoy some lasagna?

Here is my Lasagna gardening recipe:

Ingredients: collect all your waste: old boxes and cardboard, newspapers, non-glossy magazines, and junk mail. I raid my recycle bin. Start off by finding piles of poop (from non-meat eating animals), grass clippings, leaves, compost, sawdust, etc. Next review your available ingredients and see how much earth you can invigorate. Consider each pile a layer, and determine how big a plot it can cover.

Step 1: Location. Choose the area where you want to start and wet the soil thoroughly, letting it soak in overnight if very dry. Then, clear off all existing plants and chop them up leaving them where they fall. The trick to composting is breaking up the materials as much as possible.

Step 2: Base Layer. Cover the area evenly with 1-3 inches of manure (Use soil if there is none). On top of that lay any papers or cardboard you, covering the entire area. Worms particularly love the holes in the cardboard, which makes it an excellent choice when available.

Step 3: Mulch Layer. This will be a very thick layer, up to 20 inches deep. On top of the cardboard or papers put a layer of nitrogen-rich materials such as wet greens (weeds or lawn clippings), manure, coffee grounds, and kitchen vegetable scraps such as peelings, eggshells, teabags, etc. Add carbon-rich materials to cover this nitrogen-rich layer. These are the dry things: wood chips, leaves, straw, sawdust, dead plants and pine needles. Make the nitrogen and carbon material layers roughly the same depth. Have at least 3" depth in each layer. On top of all the mulch, layer more newspapers, preferably 4 papers thick. Wet this down well, overnight in a dry spell.

Step 4: Planting Layer. Now you can layer 2" or so of peat moss to hold the moisture, or just go straight to composted humus or garden soil at least 1" thick, thicker if you plan to seed it or plant a seedling on top of the papers. On top of this humus you can plant your seeds or seedling. Next you can add old soil, straw, or anything laying around that composts. You don't have to add expensive amendments or mulch. Now lightly water this down and watch your soil smile - just like lasagna, it gets better over time!

This gardening method will last for several years if left alone, and indefinitely if you occasionally add more sheets of materials to leach down nutrients into the ever-improving soil. You don't have to build expensive raised gardens to accommodate the height, just pile it all on the bare rock. Over time the pile will shrink, and the plants will grow. Keep in mind that if you're planting a potted, rooted plant, you need to put it into the planting layer; that layer of humus or soil needs to be as deep as the soil in the pot.

You can get more detailed information on this gardening method from the U.C. Davis Master Gardener website <http://ucanr.edu/sites/MarinMG/?story=662>. Be sure to stop by and see the process –happening now at the Master Gardener Demonstration Garden just off Mountain Ranch Road in San Andreas.

<http://ucanr.org/sites/CalaverasCountyMasterGardeners/>

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