

SHEET MULCHING

By Eve Werner, Butte County Master Gardener

Sheet mulching, also known as sheet composting, kills weeds by starving them of light. Dead plant material will break down into compost to enrich the soil. New weeds are reduced because it is difficult for them to anchor their roots in deep mulch. The sheeting and the mulch will break down over time, forming compost. Sheet mulching should be placed before new plants are installed if being used to kill lawn or weeds. It can be placed after plants are installed if other weed removal techniques such as solarizing have been completed first.

Materials:

1. Newspaper or plain cardboard. Don't use glossy colored pages as they may contain metal pigments.
2. Water from a hose with a spray attachment.
3. Compost or worm castings in a 1–2" layer. Quantity calculation for mulch is: (Area in square feet) x .08 to .15 ÷ 27 = cubic yards of compost required. Note, if you are replanting with native CA plants, you can omit this step.
4. Wood chip mulch in a 4"–6" layer. 'Walk-on' bark, has longish strips of wood and barks that knit together to help it stay in place. Shredded wood/bark may also be available through arborists for much less cost; verify with the supplier that it is disease free.
 - a. Quantity calculation for mulch is: (Area in square feet x .33 to .5) ÷ 27 = cubic yards of mulch required.

Process

1. Scalp your lawn or weedy area with mower set at lowest setting. Remove grass/weed clippings.
2. Water the soil thoroughly. To prevent runoff, you may have to apply water for a short period, wait for it to soak in, and then repeat as needed.
3. To reduce spillage of mulch onto adjacent paving, dig a shallow beveled trench along any edges that are bordered by paving. See drawing, below.
4. Spread 1–2" depth of compost or worm castings over entire area.
5. On a **windless** day, place newspaper (about 5–8 sheets thickness) or cardboard over grass to be killed, overlapping like shingles. **Make sure there are no gaps or holes.** Lightly sprinkle newspaper with water as you go to prevent it from blowing away. Once wet, the paper will easily tear; be careful when walking on it. If it tears, place additional newspaper over the hole.
 - a. If you are laying the sheeting around existing plants, keep the paper a foot from the plant stem, further for plants that spread by underground stems.

6. As you are laying the paper, place wood mulch over the top of the paper to a 4"-6" depth. Place the mulch as you lay the paper so you don't have to walk on/tear the wet paper. If you are placing the mulch when the plants are already in the ground, keep the mulch a foot from the plant stem.
7. Sheet mulching requires 6-10 months to kill a lawn. It can be left in place permanently.
 - a. To plant with sheet mulching in place, push back the mulch and cut away paper sheeting in a circle wide enough to dig your hole. Dig the planting hole 2x the width and 1x the depth of the plant root ball. Loosen coiled roots and place the plant in the soil so that the top of the root ball is slightly above the adjacent soil. Back fill with soil from hole, forming a slight rim at the edge of the planting hole. Replace mulch, keeping it 8" from the plant stems.

Sheet Mulching In Progress

Beveled trench along the sidewalk, newspaper layered 5-8 sheets thick, and an initial layer of wood chip mulch.



Beveled Trench Diagram

