

# Mulch Musings

WOOD CHIPS, COMPOST, PLANT DEBRIS AND LEAVES

**M**y editor asked me several weeks ago to write a column about the untraditionally dry spring and what gardeners could do about it. That was the week that the temperature reached 27°C and even I was concerned when digging in the sandy soil of my own garden, the soil had the dryness of August. As I write this column at the end of April the situation is reversed. According to Jeremy Gilbert, assistant superintendent at Forest City National “the 64mm that fell in five days would have been an ideal amount for the entire month”

Although the staff at Forest City are not as happy as I was with the cool, now wet spring, whether this had something to do with the number of golfers on the course, the unpredictability of the past weeks leaves me in angst for the season ahead and how my garden will survive.

What can gardeners do to equalize these moisture and temperature extremes in the garden yet at the same time reduce the time we spend weeding and growing plants: The answer is quite simple, Mulch?



I am a mulch fanatic, in fact if I had my way I would mulch the whole world, bare soil would never be seen amongst the plants. Materials at hand would be readily applied; wood chips, compost, and plant debris and of course leaves. You may remember my autumn column where I prowled the neighbourhood in search of bags of leaves to add to my tobacco sand garden, and even though the garden now looks a little unkempt with the leaves and chopped up plant debris from the winter I know that during the drought of summer, if we have one, that the plants will be happy.



Mulching is about soil building, and I am dismayed as I watch people each spring, even my neighbours who should know better, remove all that accumulated organic stuff from their plantings, leaving clean bare exposed soil; in southern Strathroy's case sand. What remains is the soils inability to retain moisture and sustain the garden in the drier months. Digging into the soil in my own garden, without a shovel, the soil is loose and friable and full of worms, and actually I think if worms could smile mine would.

Mulch can come in a myriad of forms; I have seen people use everything from carpet to newspaper, carpet being quite durable and enabling one to garden in slippers. Commercially there is even plastic mulch stretched out in long rows amongst fields of cucumbers and other high value crops. Mulch can be quite varied and although almost anything that covers the ground will work in retaining moisture



and preventing weeds I still need to consider the aesthetics and the soil building properties of mulch to be critical. The plastic commercial mulch and the home grown use for old carpet do little to build the soil, and if the carpet is orange shag then does nothing for the aesthetics.



I use three types of mulch in my own garden and in The Cuddy Gardens, all are free. Compost although not great at suppressing weeds does wonders to condition soil, however to produce it requires a little effort. For my own garden only the kitchen scraps make the compost and thus little is produced each year. On a whim the compost bin is emptied and tossed here and there in the garden. Unfortunately I am not one of those organized individuals who gives each new plant a treat of compost.

My main mulch is the ugly and readily available kind, directly from the garden and applied in the spring, this material is the cut up portions of the over wintering plants. I use a petrol powered hedge trimmer and cut each plant down in one inch increments. The resulting detritus is scattered about around the plant and in any bare spots in the garden.



Not attractive, but labour saving, it quickly decomposes or is hidden by the emerging foliage by late spring. I can live with the looks knowing that each time I do this the soil is being refurbished and I am the model of the efficient gardener since nothing is hauled away. It does nothing for the aesthetic quality of the garden however, but since spring flowering plants are particularly flamboyant I rely on them to overpower the dowdy looking mulch with their bright colours.

The other mulch I like that is free is the chipped utility mulch from tree companies. Most companies charge for this but since we have an emergency depot for them in the Cuddy Garden, they can drop it there anytime, in any quantity, we use over 200 yards of it each year. It is variable in consistency because of the types of tree branches being chipped and the type of chipper used. That being said however, in a garden as large as the Cuddy Gardens it is a valuable labour saving commodity. Home owners can access this material by calling their local tree company; keep in mind it is variable in consistency; sometimes it is all chips and other times it contains a lot of leaves and twigs. I have used this material on new gardens during establishment, it helps keep the weeds down and get the plants through their first year. However, if you are going to rely on looks you might wish to go for some of the more expensive shredded pine mulch.

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