

Low Maintenance Gardening Without Chemicals: Sheet Mulching

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Introduction to Sheet Mulching

One key way you can make your gardening life easier is to practice sheet mulching for weedy areas, shrub borders, and new garden beds. Imagine walking around your well-mulched garden, with no weeds or grass poking their heads up and demanding attention. All is peace, while the mulch and cardboard do the work. You need never double dig again, and you can free up shed space by giving your rototiller to the Tool Lending Library. “What is sheet mulching?”, you may ask. It’s basically putting cardboard on top of weeds to smother them, with a thick layer of mulch on top of the cardboard to make it look great and hold the cardboard in place. This method works beautifully in new gardens with small shrubs or new perennials – where there is space for weeds to grow. It’s also a huge labor savor when you want to turn part of your lawn into a vegetable or flower garden. You just sheet mulch the area, and wait six months. Then, with a trowel, make small holes right through the mulch and decaying cardboard for your baby plants. They grow up with minimal weed competition, and plenty of moisture in the soil.

To get started with sheet mulching, you can save your own cardboard, or get extra from the cardboard dumpsters around Vashon town. I like the ones behind Ace and Pandora. You will want to remove the packaging tape, because it won’t decompose like the cardboard does (after 6 months to a year). Just sprinkle the cardboard with water to loosen the tape’s grip, and wait at least half an hour. For sheet mulching over grass, be sure that not one blade of grass is visible through gaps or holes in the cardboard. Once the grass is fully covered, then you spread mulch over the cardboard. The first shovelfuls may move the cardboard out of place, so go slow at first. If the space is going to be a vegetable garden, use compost as mulch on top of the cardboard. If you are sheet mulching around established shrubs and perennials, 3-4 inches of wood chips will last much longer to deter weeds and hold in moisture. Below is an example done in less than 2 hours.



1 Before Sheet Mulching



2 During Sheet Mulching



3 After Sheet Mulching

Sheet Mulching Step By Step

1. Collect Cardboard. Save all the cardboard that comes to your house. Sheet mulching requires more cardboard than people can imagine. The bigger the pieces of cardboard, the better. The thicker the cardboard, the better. Paper bags can be used only on minimally weedy areas, or to put under the cardboard where a piece of grass might poke out. Visit the cardboard recycling dumpsters behind most commercial buildings - hardware stores and pet stores are great for this. They don't mind, as long as you don't tie up parking spots. They have to pay to have it removed, so you are doing them a favor by taking it.

2. Remove the tape from the cardboard. The plastic tape does not decompose, and will be in the soil for a very long time if you don't remove it from the cardboard. Leave the cardboard outside for a week or so, or sprinkle the box with water and wait half an hour. Either method will loosen the tape and make it much easier to remove.

3. Cut the grass or weeds down as close to the ground as possible. This will prevent them from growing out from under the cardboard.

4. Hand weed underneath shrubs or ornamental grasses. You don't want cardboard and mulch going right up to the stems of plants. They need to have a few inches space before the thick mulch begins. Hand weed along the sidewalk or hard garden path too. This lets you stop the cardboard and mulch a few inches before the path, so you don't end up seeing cardboard next to your path, or have mulch overflowing onto your path.

5. Lay out the cardboard over the area you just cut down. Don't let there be any holes, any gaps in the cardboard, or the grass/weeds will sneak right through. Small pieces of cardboard or paper bags are good to seal the gaps at the cardboard flaps.

6. Immediately cover the cardboard with at least 2 inches of your choice of mulch. Use compost if you are going to garden there again soon. If this is going to be a long term weed suppressant in a shrub border, use at least 4 inches of rough wood chips. If it needs to look really nice, you can have the base layer rough wood chips, topped off with beauty bark from a store. Place the first shovelfuls very carefully on the cardboard, so it doesn't move and create gaps for weeds to come through.

7. If you run out of mulch or cardboard before you are done, leave around six inches of cardboard visible where you left off. This will let you tuck the next batch of cardboard under the previous batch, so there are no gaps.

6. Stand back and enjoy the transformation. The weeds have disappeared, and all you see is good looking mulch.

7. Replant after 6 months. If you wish to replant the area, you will be able to do so in about 6 months. By then the cardboard will have killed the plants underneath, and pretty much decomposed, and you can make holes in the compost/wood chips to place new plants. I wouldn't go with seeds right away, just potted plants/seedlings, or bulbs.

Sheet Mulching Sources, August 2020

Wood Chips

- Buy from GreenTree Dozing, \$25 per cubic yard, delivered. E-mail: info@greentreedozing.net. Phone: 206-463-3889
- Buy from D & R Excavating, \$30 a yard. 3 yard minimum. \$35 delivery fee. Contact Doug Hoffman, phone (206) 463-3457
- Buy in bags from Island Lumber. They have beauty bark and play chips. The play chips will last longer. (206) 463-5000
- Rent a chipper from Island Lumber: \$178 (+tax) for 4 hours or \$220 (+tax) for 24 hours. The chipper handles up to 6" diameter wood. (206) 463-5000, extension 13 for rentals
- Sign up for arborist chips to be dropped off – sometimes for free. Sign up at www.getchipdrop.com
- Contact Asplundh to get on their list to have them drop off chips to you. Phone 360-271-0697
- If you see or hear a wood chipper running nearby, stop and ask if you can have some of the chips.
- There is a drop spot along Cedarhurst that King County uses sometimes, and chips are free for the taking if you see a pile of them. It is on Cedarhurst, near 107th Way SW.
- Put up a sign on the road near your property that says "Wood Chips Wanted – Follow Signs", and then place more signs to the exact spot you want them dropped off. You will need to have space for a big truck to get in and out easily.
- If you need tree pruning done, be sure to hire a company that will chip the prunings for you, and leave them on your property.

Compost (in case you want to create a garden or new lawn on that space)

- Buy from GreenTree Dozing, E-mail: info@greentreedozing.net. Phone: 206-463-3889
- Buy from D & R Excavating, Contact Doug Hoffman, phone (206) 463-3457
- Buy in bags from Island Lumber. (206) 463-5000

Cardboard or Heavy Duty Paper

- Most businesses around town have cardboard collection dumpsters and you can get cardboard from them. Pandora's Box is good, as is behind Ace Hardware, but there are many others. Please note, the cardboard is all collected by the recyclers on Wednesday mornings, so time your visit accordingly.
- Great Pacific Packaging has 3 ft corrugated single face rolls, 250 ft long, for \$41 plus \$19 shipping \$60 total. <https://www.greatpacificpackaging.com/> Good for big projects
- Gemplers has heavy paper, 2 ft wide, 150 ft long, for \$50 including shipping. I have a test going right now to compare it with dumpster cardboard. It looks promising.
<https://gemplers.com/collections/all/products/weedguard-plus-biodegradable-paper-weed-barrier>