



Batten Down the Hatches

The time of year has finally come to shut it all down. Follow this CSA gardener's advice for preparing your garden beds for their long winter nap.

(From "Batten Down the Hatch," by Kelly Wood, page 2 of 2)

Many natural options for winter mulch, such as straw, hay, autumn leaves and wood chips, are easy to find around the farm. The Great Cover-up: Mulch

The most important thing you can do for your garden or farm before winter sets in is mulch the soil. Plan to mulch your garden whenever possible in the fall, if you didn't already do it earlier in the season. It's best to mulch as soon as plants are in the ground. I heard a gardener say that bare soil is like an open wound on the skin of the Earth, and mulch serves as a bandage to help it heal. Sun and precipitation work to erode soil, baking and hammering the surface texture. Mulching helps conserve water and inhibit weeds that would compete with the crop. It regulates temperatures, keeping the soil cool on hot days and vice versa. It absorbs and blunts the impact of water droplets, whether from sprinklers or rain and hail. Mulch helps create an environment that protects the soil, sheltering the organisms, fungi and bacteria that inhabit it.

Using either organic or synthetic means doesn't really make a difference, other than being able to incorporate organics the following spring versus having to remove and potentially dispose of the synthetics if they can't be reused. Any type of mulch is multipurpose: It protects the soil texture and encourages the natural organisms to do their work. It enhances decomposition, forming compost at the soil surface, which nourishes the shallow feeder roots and the deeper root zones by gradual seepage. This compost, in turn, becomes more soil, adding back many of the minerals and nutrients that get taken out at harvest.

The list of things to mulch with is long: Synthetic choices are plastic sheeting, commercially manufactured "weed barrier" products, or the black silt fencing that's thrown away from construction sites. None of those rot, but they still serve to protect and nurture the soil and its living systems. More natural options abound and include straw, hay, autumn leaves, wood chips, rice hulls, spent grain from brewing, dryer lint, pine needles, tree bark, sawdust, bundles of sticks or twigs, small coniferous tree branches, moss, or hair. I used our dog's post-grooming hair around my tulips: It served simultaneously as mulch and a rodent deterrent with its predator-like smell. Less conventional (and less attractive) choices include newspaper or shredded office paper, herbivorous pet bedding, and torn cotton T-shirts, towels or bedsheets.

Years ago, I flipped over salvaged carpet and covered it with wood chips in an attempt to smother the weeds in my pathways: It has since rotted and left behind incredibly dark, well-drained soil that I seeded with low-growing clover and chamomile. All weeds that push through get topped by weekly mowing. Sometimes I'll mulch with weeds that don't reroor or don't have seed heads—horsetail makes fabulous mulch and can be dropped right where you pull it. Or you can use leaves of the crops themselves: When I harvest rhubarb, I lay the cut-off—and poisonous—leaves around the base of the remaining plants.

Sometimes I cover the beds that I know will be growing early spring crops with finished compost and lay a strip of silt fencing on top of it all. The earthworms and other soil creatures incorporate the compost into the ground during the winter under the protective cover of the black fabric, and when I pull it back in the spring, the bed is almost in perfect condition for planting directly. Some years, I have put incomplete compost on the beds: rotting vegetables, vines, stems, asparagus fronds and cornstalks, topped with blackened, frost-hit tomato plants and chicken-coop cleanings. Slap a piece of landscape fabric over it, walk away, and uncover it in the spring to find finished compost and happy, naturally aerated soil with a few stray stems and stalks. One quick, shallow tilling, and you're ready to go.

Snow insulates and cushions the soil from hail or ice in the fall and winter. Word of Caution

The effects of winter on garden and farm soil can be harsh, and uncovered areas will be beaten down and compacted by rain, snow and ice. While many cold-climate gardeners swear by the freeze-thaw cycle, with frost heaving doing the rototilling work, for others, the soil doesn't do anything but sit and take a beating. Our native Northwest soil, already poorly drained and predominantly heavy clay, gets battered by excessive rains and, at my high altitude, long-standing freezes bring no heaving to speak of.

The frozen ground can be good: It will kill a lot of bad bugs and larvae that overwinter in the soil, and it helps weaken



many hardy perennial weeds. But covering the soil helps mitigate the devastation that nature can bring. Snow is actually one of the best things for a winter garden: It serves to insulate and cushion any hail or ice that follow. If the snow is followed by freezing rain, plants and soil are buffered from the ice layer by the snowy pillow. Mulch under the snow adds an extra layer of protection and insulation for the soil creatures deeper down. Winter cover crops also serve to protect the soil, buffer the blows of winter weather, and give the subterranean workers protection and food to keep working during the cold season.

Now is the time to start working on preparing your farmland or garden for the impending winter. It's some of the last work you'll have to do before sitting back by the fire with a seed catalog, anticipating next spring. Or just put your feet up with a good book or your handwork, and don't think about anything. Enjoy the time off: You've earned it with all your hard work.

About the Author: Kelly Wood heavily mulches the 55 raised beds of her CSA farm in Portland, Ore.

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