



Do double duty with sheet mulching

Hurricane Hermine left us with lots of yard trash. But it's not all bad.

This presents a good opportunity to obtain lots of relatively clean and chemical free mulch for your yard and garden.

Wood chips are available from the Leon County Solid Waste Facility at 7550 Apalachee Parkway, as well as all Rural Waste Service Centers. If you have trees you are thinking about removing after the Hermine experience, think about engaging a tree service that will chip the downed tree on site so you won't even have to make a trip to the landfill to improve your yard.

There's a lot of information out there about mulching and composting — but why not take another route and do both at the same time?

This easy fix is often called "sheet composting," "sheet mulching" or the "lasagna method." Rather than fertilizing and mulching flower beds and garden plots, sheet composting can take care of it all. Nature has done this in forests since the beginning of time. As with regular composting, you can be as casual or compulsive about sheet composting as you wish.

At its very simplest, it involves a layer of cardboard or newspaper over the area you have selected topped by a mulch material such as leaves, wood chips, or pine straw. First, cut any grass, weeds, etc. and leave them where they drop. Remove any tape, plastic sleeves, etc., from the cardboard, and place it on the ground over the cut greenery with no gaps. Grass and weeds are excellent at finding the least bit of light. If you are using newspaper, lay it anywhere from two to five or six sheets thick (quarter- to half-inch), again with no gaps.

Wet the cardboard or newspaper well and add wood chips, leaves, grass clippings, pine straw, or whatever mulch you have available. If a weed or two pops through, just add some more mulch.

As it decomposes, the mulch may have to be renewed with additional material from time to time, perhaps once a year, but with much less effort than continuous weed pulling, while the decomposed mulch will provide the nutrients stored within its tissues to feed your plants.

Worms love this environment and can aerate compacted soil, along with other soil organisms seeking shelter under the mulch layer.

Last fall, the first at my new house, I noticed a whole row of long slim leaves beginning to grow in the turf on the side of my front yard. It looked like lirioppe, but I couldn't understand why it just started growing there. It proved to be hurricane lilies, which emerge from the ground in the fall, first with blooms, then with slim grasslike leaves that die back again about April. The lilies didn't bloom, possibly because I didn't realize they were there and the area had been mowed regularly, disposing of any shoots or buds. I surmised this was the edge of an original bed, but grass had grown right over the area up to the base of the shrubs in the bed. I decided to use sheet mulching to reclaim the bed without the necessity of digging grass over an extended area. I applied cardboard and mulch from the row of hurricane lilies back throughout the original bed. It has worked nicely and I now have a wide planting bed at the edge of my yard ready for whatever inspiration might suggest.

If you want to be more thorough, you can use permaculture author Toby Hemenway's, "bomb proof" sheet mulch, which includes multiple layers of nitrogen- and carbon-rich materials, including compost and usually a manure layer. Also, you can read about sheet mulch, composting and no-dig gardens online via UF/ IFAS EDIS documents.

Use sheet mulching under existing trees (out to at least the drip line), in existing borders and beds in your yard, and to create new bedding areas for trees, shrubs, flowers, or vegetables. When applying around trees and existing shrubs, leave a gap of several inches around the trunk to discourage insects and diseases. Mulch around existing trees and shrubs should be kept to about 2 to 4 inches deep, so as not to smother the roots.

When preparing new beds for ornamental or vegetable plants, cover even deeper. With the addition of soil and compost on top, you can plant in it right away, or you can let it mature for a number of months. This is a particularly good time to mulch planting beds, as it insulates roots from winter freezes.

When starting a raisedbed, try using cardboard in the bottom of the bed rather than landscape cloth or other barriers. I did this when I made a small raised bed from found materials over grass in my yard. Vegetables with deep roots such as carrots, beets, okra, tomatoes, melons, and winter squash can't grow through landscape cloth, and it will eventually partially decompose and leave shreds of the material throughout the bed. The cardboard will kill weeds and grass underneath it, and will completely decompose in about six months to a year. You will be left with deep aerated soil in your beds. When laying the cardboard in raised beds, you may want to poke a few small holes to let water drain through, particularly over compacted soil. In fact, when placing raised beds over compacted soil, it is a good idea to loosen the soil with a shovel or garden fork first.

When adding fresh mulch material to vegetable beds, you don't want to mix the mulch into your soil. The microorganisms which help decompose mulch utilize nitrogen in breaking down the carbon materials. Mulch which has not been composted may well deprive your plants of nitrogen if mixed with the soil. When placed on top of the soil, only a very thin layer is affected and the plants should continue to thrive.

So let's get busy mulching and turn "lemons" from Hurricane Hermine into "lemonade" — healthier and more trouble-free yards and gardens.

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UF/LEON COUNTY EXTENSION



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