

Ruby's Magic Mulch Recipe or How to Turn Dirt into Gold

Basic Recipe

Lay down after a rain or the morning after 1 hour of watering:

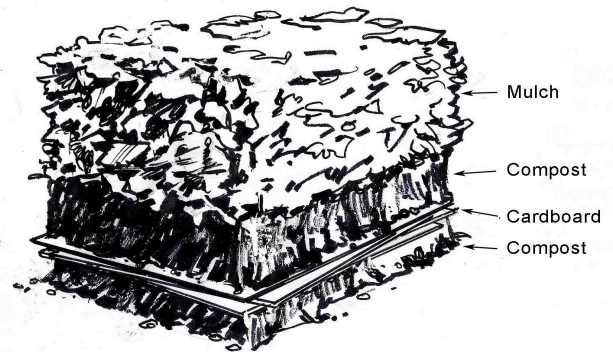
Cardboard 2-3 layers, overlapped

Compost: 3-4 inches

Tree Mulch: 8-12 inches

For every 100 square feet you are covering you will need 1 –2 cubic yards of compost and 3 to 4 cubic yards of mulch.

You can sheet mulch anytime, but the best time to do it is in the Fall, or before your biggest rainy season. You want your sheet mulch to get nice and wet so the worms will come up and do the rest of the work for you.



Supplemental Information ~ Materials and where to get them

Cardboard: The cardboard will smother out weeds and provide a foundation for your sheet mulch. Get the largest pieces possible. Furniture stores and bike shops will sometimes save their boxes for you. Keep an eye out as you drive around town. Look for moving boxes on Craigslist. Remove all the staples and tape. Overlap the edges to block out all light to the weeds. Two layers will work, but three is better.

Compost: Best: homegrown compost. Second best but more expensive: American Soil. Third best but inexpensive: Compost from Davis Street Transfer Station (the Alameda County dump). You will need a truck with good suspension and a tarp.

Tree Mulch: Start calling arborists tree companies in the yellow pages and ask if they will deliver their waste wood chips. Sometimes they list on Craigslist but will ask you take 20 yards. 20 yards is a lot of mulch! Try to get something with both chips and leaves. Avoid cedar, redwood because of the acidity and acacia because of the seeds. Using wood chips for mulch uses up some of the nitrogen in the soil as it breaks down. Getting mulch that has leaves or grass clippings will balance this out. You can also add some nitrogen-rich fertilizer back in later, or cover crop with Fava Beans. Other materials you can add to your layers: Manure, Straw (not hay) available at the race track, leaves and other compostables.

When is it ready?

The sheet mulch needs at least one full rainy season to do its magic. This is when the worms come out of nowhere and eat through the cardboard to get to that delicious compost. If you are starting in the Fall you can plant fava beans into your mulch. Just tuck the beans about an inch under the mulch. If you are starting any other time of year you can try planting zucchini or potatoes in your sheet mulch. For zucchini you'll scoop out a hole about the size of a soccer ball and fill it with rich potting soil. Plant your starts into this and re-cover with a bit of mulch. Water thoroughly and often. For potatoes do the same, using a bit less dirt around each piece of seed potato. Be careful with potatoes though. If you plant them now you will have volunteers in those spots for years to come.

If you are patient or if your soil is really bad, you can do a 2 year program: Sheet mulch in the Fall. In the spring, rather than turning your mulch, plant zukes and potatoes. At the end of that growing season water deeply or wait for the first rain., use a fork to lightly mix the layers, but don't turn under or completely cultivate. Add another inch or two of compost and another 3-4 inches of tree mulch. Plant Fava beans. The following spring cultivate your soil as you normally would. You will have created 6-8 inches of gorgeous top soil. Be sure to get under the lowest layer of what you added and mix the native soil in.