

Site Preparation

Before planting an area, the site needs to be prepared. Several techniques are available to get your garden area ready for planting. They will vary in expense, duration of time needed for success, and ease of use.

A. Mulch. (For purposes of this hand-out, mulch will be thought of as a way to kill existing vegetation, rather than mulching to prevent weeds and retain moisture around existing plantings.) The choice of materials includes:

1. Chopped leaves – these may be present on your property. If placed on the site in a thick layer (about 4” or so), they can kill off grass by depriving the grass of light and air. NOTE: Mow the grass to a short level prior to laying on the mulch. Advantages – no cost. Natural process also benefits soil. Can plant through the mulch. Disadvantage – requires several months to be effective

2. Wood chips – Make sure the wood isn’t contaminated with buckthorn berries or other undesirable materials. Chips may be available from a township site. If you have tree work done on your property, you could have the wood chipped to use for this purpose. Advantages and disadvantages are the same as for chopped leaves.

NOTE: There is some disagreement among experts about using wood chips for mulch. The issue is nitrogen depletion in the soil while the chips are decomposing. Chips may also affect a burn strategy if the area would be included in future burns.

3. Compost – This can be purchased from companies if you don’t have your own compost. Some attention should be paid to quality of the compost and the pH. (One of the local sources is Midwest Organics Recycling and their product is Organimix.)

Advantages and disadvantages - the same as for Nos. 1 and 2.

Possibly the best use of compost would be as an additional layer over newspaper (No. 4).

4. Thick layers (maybe 8 or 10) of newspaper/cardboard. This technique has the same advantages and disadvantages as Nos. 1, 2, and 3. Additional disadvantage is that the paper can easily blow away in the wind. It would be recommended to wet the paper and combine this approach with an additional layer of mulching material to keep the paper down. Existing lawn or other vegetation should be mowed short before applying the mulch.

The above techniques all encourage natural processes that benefit the soil. They can be left in place, and holes poked through for the plants. The mulch can be left in place to act as mulch around the new plantings – keeping weeds out and conserving moisture.

- B. Herbicide – Glyphosate (Round-up) must be applied when the plants are growing in order to be effective. If there are taller weeds, they should be cut short, but not so short that there is no green growth. A short interval to allow the weeds to start to re-grow prior to application would be useful. This herbicide becomes inactive in the soil.
Advantage – the technique is fast – existing vegetation should be dead in a couple of weeks. Disadvantage – some people don't want to use chemicals, and there is a small expense.

NOTE: care should always be taken when using the chemicals to read the package directions, and pay careful attention to the environmental conditions when applying. Don't use when wind will carry the herbicide to unintended areas. **Also – Round-up should not be used near water. If herbicide is being utilized in such a site, special formulations need to be selected.**

- C. Sod cutter – If you are creating a garden area in a lawn, a sod cutter could be rented to remove the turf grass.
Advantage – very fast. Disadvantage – expense. Technique would only be appropriate if area is lawn.

D. Solarizing the vegetation – The idea is to heat the soil and deprive the vegetation of sun and air during the growing season. The most common material used for this is plastic. Some people prefer to use clear plastic, and some use black plastic. The plastic would need to be removed prior planting. A natural mulch could be applied to the ground to keep the weeds out and conserve moisture when the plastic is removed.

Advantage – it is a non-chemical way of killing vegetation.

Disadvantage – it cannot be left in place, and may damage beneficial soil organisms.

The following link provides a discussion of solarizing.

<http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74145.html>

As proponents of native plant gardening, we encourage you to think about natural processes and solutions that are not your typical garden center approaches.

Tilling is not recommended because it brings weed seeds to the surface.

This hand-out only scrapes the surface (no pun intended), and there is much more information available on these various approaches. It is meant only to provide basic information.