

Many sources are predicting a colder than usual winter. Mulches are a very good way to protect and ultimately nourish our precious plants and also help the soil retain moisture during our often drought-like summers. If our winter is mild instead, you'll at least have some of your spring readiness work done early.

Bark is the perfect mulch for acid loving plants. A one to two inch layer works perfectly to curtail or prevent weeds and those that do sprout pull up easily. Bark turns into compost in about two to four years. You can let it biodegrade where it is or till it into your existing soil. When tilling composted bark into the soil make sure you don't disturb the roots of the plants. You could also rake up the bark and add it to your compost pile, making sure to mix it in with plenty of green vegetation and some manure.

Many people, including me just leave the bark where it is, rebarking every three or four years. Always avoid piling the mulch up around the root zones of plants. You won't want to use bark on perennial beds unless your plants are acid loving. Perennials don't like wood mulches or any deep mulch over their crowns. Densely planting perennial beds will drastically curtail weed growth without mulching.

You'll read gardening books and columns saying wood leaches the nitrogen out of the soil. There's as much literature listing the pros as there are the cons of this theory. Bark mulches are mostly safe to use in our northwest gardens but not in vegetable or most perennial beds.

My very favorite mulch of all time is a combination of Cedar Grove Compost and topsoil. These mulches work especially well in perennial beds and vegetable gardens. Both Vern's Organic Topsoil and Emu Topsoil are very good sources for this mixture. Emu Topsoil is located on 22244 Port Gamble Road in Poulsbo and Vern's is at 22622 Bond Road NE in Poulsbo. Call Emu Topsoil at 779-5614 or Vern's at 779-2764. Several inches of this compost rich mulch will keep weeds down and will greatly enrich your garden's soil.

If you like the look of natural brown or black/brown soil without mulch make sure to densely plant these areas. The more desired plants you have in the area the less weeds you'll have. When we lived in England our house came with an Italian-speaking gardener named Sam. Fortunately for me he could also communicate in English. Every week he'd arrive and turn over all the bare soil in our flowerbeds. By continuously turning over the soil he was exposing all the weed seeds to death by exposure to the elements or by becoming feed for the birds. I never ever had to weed because Sam's methods took care of the weed problem.

Sam always avoided turning over the soil in overly wet soggy weather. The trick is to not compact your soil with the soles of your shoes or with your gardening tools. Pick up a handful of soil and squeeze it. If it sticks together like a mudball or holds together like cookie dough don't garden. If the soil is still crumbly and there are definite separate particles it's ok to keep turning your soil over. Mother Nature and your hands and eyes will tell you when to stop.

If you have some very weed-rich areas in your garden try setting that area aside for weed annihilation therapy. This therapy works especially well for areas you want to newly plant or replant. If there are plants in the area it's wise to dig them up and move them to a more weed-free area. Turn over the soil using a spading fork, spade or rototiller. Now cover the whole area with several layers of newspaper. Be generous with the layers. (Cardboard works too, but takes longer to biodegrade.) Water the area well so the layers of paper (cardboard) become wet through. Spread a layer of bark or straw over the whole area and let it rest until spring. In the spring you can remove the bark or straw to your compost area. Or simply dig through the layers and plant where desired. You can also rototill or dig up the entire area and you're ready to plant. The weeds that might emerge will now be easy to pull up and destroy. You can also make paths in your garden using the cardboard/newspaper method but skip the rototilling and/or digging and planting part.

After eating all that Thanksgiving turkey maybe you'll want to get out into your gardens and do some yard work. Bon Appetite and have a glorious holiday weekend and hopefully some happy gardening too.

You can email comments to Peg at gardenmentor@yahoo.com or in care of this newspaper.