

This is the time of year to control weeds in your garden. If you spend time now you won't have to work so hard the rest of the year and can spend more time planting and enjoying all your wonderful plants.

A few weekends ago my husband used our Red Dragon to crisp and destroy all the weeds on our gravel paths. The Red Dragon is a torch attached to a long hose connected to a propane tank. Red Dragons run from about \$35 up to \$65 or so and are sold at hardware and home improvement stores. If you haven't planted your vegetable garden yet, use a Red Dragon to cremate all your weeds and weed seeds. The Red Dragon is a great chemical-free way to control weeds.

I always get great satisfaction pulling and digging up the nasty critters. Weeding burns up approximately 345 calories per hour. If you're trying to lose weight your body will burn up even more than the 345 calories.

Mulch helps control weeds, retain moisture, nourish your plants and inhibit weed growth. Homegrown compost is the best mulch but organic Cedar Grove Compost is also excellent. Plants will thrive with the addition of compost. Some gardeners like to apply one or two inches of washed dairy manure. Next week we'll talk about compost, manure, nourishment and weed barriers.

We use bark mulch from Vern's Organic Topsoil on our garden beds comprised mostly of woody plants and Northwest natives. We apply it about every three to five years. Weeds pull up easily (or don't grow at all). As an added bonus, slugs don't much care for the bark either. Bark slowly decomposes and becomes soil. We don't pile it up around the base of the plants though. In fact, you don't want to pile any mulch up around the base of your plants. (We don't use bark mulch in our vegetable garden or perennial beds.)

Much controversy surrounds the use of bark. You'll find as many pros about its use as you will cons. Many gardeners feel that bark robs nitrogen from the plants. I called Craig Cogger, Extension Soil Scientist at WSU Puyallup to get the definitive answer on bark as mulch. Craig provided the following information.

Our soil is full of microbes that break down the soil freeing up nutrients for the plants to use. Bark breaks down slowly and is not a ready food source for the microbes. (So it is benign.) Bark keeps soil moister and provides a barrier to weed growth. Ultimately the bark mulch very slowly breaks down and forms a layer similar to the rich forest floor. A one to two inch layer for weed control does not rob nitrogen from the plants.

You will have nitrogen problems if fresh bark is physically mixed into the soil because when the microbes begin breaking down the bark (decomposing it) they need nitrogen to balance their diet. Therefore the microbes will bind up the nitrogen. It is only at this point that plants won't have nitrogen available. That's why you don't want to use sawdust or very fine bark as a mulch. Also never use alder chips for mulch because alder breaks down faster than cedar creating a greater short-term nitrogen deficiency.

Speaking of weeding and exercise you can help weed and garden at both the Bainbridge Library and the Poulsbo Library. Bainbridge has the Friday Tidy bunch led by Ann Lovejoy. The group meets at the library every Friday (rain or shine) at 9 a.m. and works until 11 a.m. Poulsbo's group is called the Garden Keepers led by Diane DiGleria and meets the first Saturday of every month from 9 a.m. to noon; and the third Friday from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. Both groups want to help the public learn all about plants (and weeding). It's completely free and all you have to do is show up with your favorite gardening tools for enjoyable work and camaraderie.

Here's a list of seven different plant sales to satisfy your plant collecting needs: Central Valley Garden Club (April 27 and 28, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., 10200 Central Valley Road); Sunnyslope Garden Club (May 4 and 5, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Community Hall, Clifton Road); Long Lake Garden Club (May 5, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Kitsap Bank, Port

Orchard); East Bremerton Garden Club (May 5, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., Perry Avenue Mall); Evergreen Garden Club (May 12, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Pope Center by Olympia Savings Bank, Belfair); Master Gardeners (May 18 and 19, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Cat Barn, Kitsap County Fairgrounds); and Poulsbo Garden Club (May 19, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., Poulsbo Library).

Contact Peg with comments or questions in care of this newspaper or at gardenmentor@yahoo.com