

WHY SHEET MULCH?

Sheet mulch gardens make use of free or low-cost, locally available “waste” materials, such as cardboard and yard waste, to create living soil for growing gardens. Though this process takes time, sheet mulch gardens eliminate the need to dig out grass or import soil to your site. Students may explore the decomposition process as the sheet mulch breaks down, gaining increased appreciation for nature’s essential process of nutrient cycling and the intricate balance of soil life.



STEPS FOR CREATING A SHEET MULCH GARDEN OF ANY SIZE

- Site Prep:** If there is brush or tall grass present, cut it down and leave it in place.
- Manure/Food Waste Layer (Optional):** Wet the area and cover with composted manure and/or food waste (pre-consumer fruit and vegetable waste) so that the majority of the grass is not visible, about 1 to 2 inches of material. (These materials are high in nitrogen and will help to kill the grass and attract earthworms to the garden.)
- Cardboard/Newspaper Layer:** Cover thoroughly with wet newspaper (at least 1/2 to 1 inch thick) and/or cardboard. The pieces should all overlap, leaving no exposed areas. Water the newspaper and cardboard until they are saturated. This can be assisted by slicing the top of the cardboard, allowing water to infiltrate, or soaking the cardboard in water-filled garbage cans or wheelbarrows as you work.
- Soil/Compost Layer:** If finished compost and/or soil is available, place it on top of the cardboard/newspaper layer; this will allow for immediate planting. If these are not available, create a compost pile by adding compostable materials (chopped yard wastes, greens and browns) over the entire cardboard/newspaper layer. Wet thoroughly to begin the composting process.
- Mulch Layer:** Add mulch over the compost layer, from 3 to 6 inches thick. The mulch should be weed-free. Partially-composted mulch is preferable to raw wood chips (these will take longer to decompose).
- Water:** Thoroughly water all layers until saturated. This is key to rapid decomposition, as the soil microbes need moisture to do their work. Water regularly if weather is dry.
- Vermicast/Compost Tea:** Add the “tea” to the sheet mulch to inoculate it with living microbes that are an important part of a healthy garden and to help speed the decomposition process toward healthy, living soil!
- Cover Crops (Optional):** Grow a cover crop from seed (such as sunn hemp) to help improve the soil and discourage weed growth. Chop and incorporate the plants into the soil/sheet mulch before they become woody.
- Pathways:** Once the sheet mulch has turned into soil, be sure to create distinct garden beds and pathways. It is important to avoid soil compaction by only walking in the garden pathways. Optional border materials may include logs, bricks, painted rocks, string, etc.
- Planting Guidelines For Sheet Mulch Gardens:**
 - For vines (sweet potato in particular), slips can be planted into the mulch.
 - For seeds and small transplants, pull away the mulch and plant into finished compost or soil (which may be added as a layer or in specific areas for immediate planting).
 - For larger transplants pull all the material away, cut a hole in the cardboard and plant into the soil below. Then replace the layered materials around the new planting, being careful to not have the mulch be too thick around the stem as this can cause rot.
- Garden Care:** Be sure to continually care for your soil by adding good-quality compost and other natural amendments. A monthly application of vermicast (dissolved in water and applied to garden soil) will contribute greatly to the health of your garden.

