

November 18, 2015



Sheet Mulching 101
By Deborah Nicolls
UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County

After four years of drought your lawn may be in the same condition of many others in this county: that is, dead or dying. Do you really want to go to the trouble and expense of reviving a moribund sea of grass, or have you decided it's finally time to switch to a truly drought tolerant garden? How do you get started?

The first thing you have to do is eliminate your lawn. Fall is a good time to get started with that in an environmentally-friendly way by sheet mulching. Sheet mulching will kill existing plants, suppress future weed growth, keep the soil moist and greatly benefit the tiny creatures in your soil that are so vital to healthy plant growth.

First knock down tall weeds so they lay flat. Remove bulky plants and invasive weeds such as Bermuda grass. Cap sprinkler heads, or convert them to drippers. If it's dry, soak the area to start decomposition. If you like a tidy look, you can edge your lawn area, cutting back eight and one-half inches from paths, patios or fences. Dig down three inches. You can use the soil you dig up to create mounds, to give your new garden visual interest, or disperse it around the area you will be mulching, flipping the sod roots up. If you have large plants you want to put in, do so now, digging holes into the existing lawn area.

Now comes the sheet part of the mulching. Lay out a water and air permeable barrier on top of your lawn, such as cardboard, newspaper or burlap. Cardboard and newspaper are both items you may have around already, or cardboard can be scavenged from many locations. Don't use cardboard that has shiny colors or photos on it. Remove any tape or staples. You will need quite a bit of material, because whatever you use should overlap by six to eight inches. No daylight should be able to get through to the old lawn. Wet the cardboard so it lies down and shape it around obstacles. Keep it away from the base of any plants you are keeping.

November 18, 2015

Once you are done, layer with compost and mulch. The compost is not necessary with native plants, but will help build the soil for others. Put three to five inches of mulch over the soil. Tree prunings, wood chips, leaves, straw, or even pine needles will work.

Plant into your mulch by punching holes through the sheet layer. Plants in four-inch pots can be planted on top of the cardboard if you used compost. It will take months for the grass to fully decompose, so keep it covered. I always try to time any new planting until rain is forecast. Be sure and keep your compost and mulch away from tree trunks and stems.

For further information on sheet mulching, go to ucanr.edu and in the search window, type “sheet mulching”. There is a wealth of information to be had there. Enjoy your new landscape!

There is no Master Gardener public education class scheduled for this weekend. UCCE Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://ucanr.edu/edmg>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.