

Down and dirty with year-round mulching

Use organic garden materials to protect plants and fertilise the soil for next season

MARY LOU SHAW

For those of us who are, even now its colder, still raking leaves and fussing about keeping our lawns clean, it's interesting to step back and see "lawn debris" as having a purpose. I suspect Mother Nature actually has a plan in laying down her leafy blanket before the dead of winter arrives. For example, the layers of leaves create an insulating blanket for winter over the small seedlings of the forests. When warm weather returns, these leaves break down to enrich the soil. We can emulate nature by mulching our plants and help protect them for the coming winter.

Mulch has other important roles besides insulation. A heavy layer of mulch conserves moisture in the garden to help plants survive hot and dry summers. Mulch is also a tremendous aid in smothering weeds. When gardening, I much prefer to concentrate on vegetables than spending time and energy weeding. Continual mulching also improves the soil's structure and fertility. We are rewarded with more nutritious and tasty produce when there's mulch to provide constant nutrition for plants.

Another benefit of mulch is to keep vegetables off damp soil and thereby prevent produce like cucumbers and tomatoes from getting dirty and even mouldy. Additional mulching before fall on winter prevents roots and bulbs from freezing and the soil from heaving and disturbing roots.

Different mulches

Mulching, like composting, is a basic practice of organic gardeners. We might think of "organic gardening" only as gardening without chemicals. Just as importantly, however, organic means using "carbon compounds", or

materials from animals and vegetables, for mulch and fertilisers. Therefore, mulching is usually done with materials like grass clippings, shredded leaves, hay, straw, compost, sawdust, or newspaper. Some people also use polyethylene products for mulch. I don't use those because they're made from petroleum, and I also dislike the waste they create. I'd rather use



A thick layer of organic mulch insulates the ground and prevents a deep freeze

materials that break down and enrich the soil and therefore don't need me to clean them up!

"Mulch" and "compost" are often synonymous. By hauling compost now to the beds in the garden, things can be all ready to put out seedlings next spring when the temperature permits. This is a life-saver when the rain has been heavy and mud prevents easy movement around planting areas.

Balancing different mulches: pros and cons

It's important to know about the "down-sides" of different mulches so we can compensate for them. For example, materials that are high in carbon will actually "rob" nitrogen

from the soil as they break down. These materials include newspaper, sawdust, and straw. They're still great mulches to use, but you'll want to add extra nitrogen to the soil with compost, manure, or blood and bone meal.

The last of the season's grass clippings are useful, but if they've gone to seed, you'll be punished by having grass to weed out of your gardens. Grass clippings and leaves tend to mat and prevent rain from entering the soil. Shred leaves several times with a lawn mower and add straw to grass. This makes both leaves and grass excellent mulches.

I don't use fresh manure for mulch because it burns garden plants and it introduces weeds. Once manure is composted, however, these drawbacks no longer exist.

Eight to 10 sheets of newspaper does a good job of smothering weeds. I think newspaper is ugly in the garden, so I put other mulch on top of it. Don't use any glossy sheets. These contain chemicals that aren't good for plants or people. If you have a good supply of newspaper and use it regularly, your soil will become acidic. Check the pH of the soil and add lime to balance the pH if necessary.

A potential mulch that I've never used but I have heard warnings about is peat moss. Peat moss blows away when it dries and is difficult to remoisten. Additionally, it's expensive and doesn't add any nutrients to the soil. And if by chance you have a supply of sunflower hulls you were going to use for mulch, don't. They contain chemicals that stunt or even kill plants. Maybe that's nature's way of keeping the weeds down where sunflowers grow?

A couple of precautions

Now that I've got you all enthused about mulching, let me add a



Raking the late autumn leaves for mulch, a wonderful and versatile natural resource

couple caveats for the next growing season. Eager as you may be, don't mulch your garden too early when the soil hasn't yet warmed. You will delay the growing season by keeping the soil cool. For those interested (and I am), a soil thermometer will for example tell us when it's time to plant tomatoes (soil at least 60 degrees Fahrenheit) or corn (soil warmed to 70 degrees). Once the soil is warmed, get that mulch on.

Secondly, never mulch dry soil. Mulching when the soil is dry pre-

vents rain from penetrating. Mulching after a rain or a good watering helps retain soil moisture.

Finally, don't apply dense mulch close to the roots of plants. This can encourage fungal problems. I believe that placing thick mulch up against seedlings also makes it easier for slugs to attack the plants.

Late autumn reminders

Before winter truly arrives, what should we be doing to protect our perennial flowers, bulbs, and veg-

etables? Ideally, apply a thick layer of organic mulch around and over them. This will insulate the soil and prevent a deep freeze. The soil will therefore not heave or become compacted and non-friable.

Remember, you're also tucking precious earthworms in for the winter. They will really appreciate a layer of shredded leaves covered by straw, and will return the favour by aerating your soil next year.

Excerpted from Mother Earth News

15 tips for mindful seasonal dining

DR MICHELLE MAY

Do you anticipate the Christmas holidays but dread the inevitable onslaught of seasonal eating opportunities? Do your Christmas events revolve more around eating than people, presents, decorations, travel, or the meaning of the season?

Eating mindfully and keeping your diet in balance during the jolly season can be a real challenge – unless you have the right mindset. These 15 Christmas eating tips will help you enjoy the season more while eating less.

1. It's easy to be distracted from signals of physical hunger and satiety at social gatherings, especially when food is the main event. Pay close attention to your body's signals to guide your eating.

2. Think of your appetite as a limited expenses account. How much do you want to spend on appetisers or the starter? Do you want to save some room for dessert? Go through this process mentally to avoid eating too much food and feeling uncomfortable for the rest of the evening.

3. Ignore the outdated diet advice of "eat before you go to a party so you won't be tempted". That's absurd. You want to be hungry enough to enjoy your favourites. Pace your eating prior to the event so you'll be hungry – but not famished – at mealtime.

4. Most people are food suggestible, so socialise away from the sight of the food.

5. Survey all of the food at a buffet before making your choices. Choose the foods that you really want most, and remind yourself that you can have the other foods another time.

6. Be a food snob. Skip the shop bought goodies, the dried-out fudge, and the so-so sausage rolls. How much less would you eat if you only ate foods that tasted fabulous?

7. If the food is so special, then rather than eating on autopilot,

give it your full attention. Eat mindfully by reducing distractions and sitting down to eat – even if it's just a biscuit.

8. Appreciate the appearance and aroma of your food. Put your fork down and savour one small bite at a time. You'll eat less food but enjoy it more.

9. Choose small portions so if the food doesn't taste as good as you expected, you can stop eating it and choose something else.

10. Be aware of mindless grazing that leaves you feeling stuffed but strangely unsatisfied.

11. Be cautious of obligatory eating – you paid for it, it's free, or someone made it for you. A polite but firm "No thank you" usually works well but if you're concerned about hurting someone's feelings, ask for the recipe or a small portion to take home with you for later.

12. Before reaching for seconds, pause and ask yourself, "How do I want to feel when I'm finished?"

13. Restaurant servings are sometimes "two for the price of one". Request appetiser portions, co-order with your dining partners, or have the waiter pack up your meal in a doggy bag as soon as you feel satisfied.

14. During extended seasonal meals, you may want to remove your plate, have it taken away, or put your napkin over it, to avoid nibbling unconsciously.

15. Don't use exercise as punishment for eating. Instead, look for opportunities to move more, like a walk after dinner to enjoy the Christmas lights, or a lap or two around the local park to enjoy the fresh bite in the crisp Christmas air.

Most importantly, delight all of your senses. Enjoy the company, the atmosphere, the entertainment, and the traditions as much, if not more, than just the food.

Dr Michelle May is a recovered yo-yo dieter and author of 'Eat What You Love, Love What You Eat'. www.amihungry.com



If you enjoy an open fire during the winter, there's still time to get your chimney swept before any snow comes

Quick home-care for the colder weather

ALYSSA DAVIS

Late autumn is the perfect time before the Christmas season gets fully under way to get some of those home maintenance tasks done that you've been putting off since early summer. Before the snow and cold weather of winter arrives, you should be looking for ways to conserve heat and protect your home from the onslaught of the elements.

It's also a great time to take care of a few of those nagging little problems you really don't want to tolerate until the warmer weather of spring arrives next year. Here is a list of home-maintenance tasks that can help get you started.

Sweep or stuff your chimney

If you are lucky enough to have the opportunity to enjoy using an open fire during the rapidly cooling days of late autumn and the colder days of winter, now is your last chance to get your chimney

swept in preparation. There are still lots of chimney sweeps working in and around London and throughout the country. If you find that you're paying out more than you'd like at this time of year with all those presents still left to buy to get this job done, mark your calendar next year to timetable this task to take place during the late summer. If you have modern heating but decorative fireplaces with chimneys that are still patent, you can stop the winter winds from howling down them by stuffing them loosely with newspaper above the line of sight – a simple and hugely effective draft exclusion method that costs next to nothing.

Weatherproof your windows

Windows are one of the prime areas where heat can escape from a home. If you remember feeling cold air around your windows last winter, now is the time to make sure you don't experience the same problem this year. Although there's a lot to be said for replacing

older windows with more energy-saving models, that might not be in your budget this year and can be food for thought for next year's plan.

You can improve the energy efficiency of your existing windows by simply using insulation strips to seal any small spaces that are letting cold air in and warm air out. If you have a particularly problematic window, plastic film can be affixed to the window frame and then tightened using a hair dryer. This simple economical method of keeping out the chill can really work wonders.

Outdoor must-dos

Before the weather really does get too cold, it's time to take care of a few important outdoor chores. Some plants and bushes appreciate being pruned during the late autumn. However, before taking your pruning shears to your favourite bush, be sure to do a little research to make sure it's the right time of year for the task.

Late autumn is also the perfect time to plant flower bulbs such as tulips, daffodils, and crocuses. When these beautiful flowers appear next spring, you'll be glad you took this last opportunity of the season to plant them.

It's also time to get your patio and garden furniture ready for the winter season. If possible, move your furniture into a protected area such as a shed.

If you must leave them outdoors through the winter, protect them with specially designed covers. Before storing or covering your patio furniture, give it a good clean. You'll be thrilled you did as it will save time next spring when you're ready to use them again for your first barbecue.

Alyssa Davis specialises in creating stylish interiors with metal wall art. She is a staff writer and decorating specialist with Metal-Wall-Art.com where she offers stylish suggestions for decorating with metal wall decor.