

Preparing a Garden for Winter and Building Soil with....



"Interbay Mulch"

As an over-winter method for building humus-rich soil, it would be difficult to improve on the "Interbay Mulch" (named after the community garden in Seattle where it was developed). Interbay-mulched soil, according to lab tests, is "uniquely active". Over a winter, an Interbay Mulch will give you a large volume of humus as well as a rich diversity of bacteria, fungi, protozoa, beneficial nematodes, micro-arthropods, beetles, millipedes and worms. Living soil is key to successful organic gardening. Grow lush healthy disease and weed free gardens after just one winter.

Interbay Mulch is basically various organic matter, a mix "greens" and "browns", culled from the urban waste stream piled on top of your soil and covered with burlap coffee sacks. And it's all free! As long as a good mix of materials is kept covered and moist you will be rewarded with remarkable humus in the spring.

Why the burlap?

Covering organic matter with burlap fools nocturnal, light-avoiding organisms into working for you 24 hours a day. Burlap diffuses and soaks up rain preventing it from driving into the mulch. It also inhibits evaporation, keeping organic materials uniformly moist but has enough permeability for needed oxygen to reach all parts of the mulch.

Birds are unable to forage in the mulch so worms and other organisms flourish and multiply. Burlap covers the mulch but is also part of the habitat cultivating a rich variety of fungi and providing a home for beetles, spiders, worms and the like.

What do I use for mulch under the burlap?

First and foremost the debris from your garden. Chop up your corn, bean and squash plants. Tomato plants, etc. (Many of us don't even worry about seeds because of ongoing top dressing mulches during the growing season. (If you are concerned about seeds or diseases, put those plants in the hot composting holding cages.) Think the same "brown" and "green" mix used for hot composting, approximately 50-50. The more variety in materials the better.

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What are some examples of "Browns"?

Leaves are easily obtained in the fall. Dried cornstalks. Straw is a good brown; even better if it is rotted. You can also add rotted burlap, cotton dryer lint, shredded paper, and season with a few pine needles. Woody material should be limited to rotted material that you can smoosh between your fingers.

What about "greens"?

Practically anything that doesn't burn when you put a match to it. Garden debris, green corn stalks, fresh grass clippings, coffee grounds (leave a bucket at your favorite espresso cart), juice bar pulp, spent grain and hops, seaweed, grape pressings, apple pomace, tea, and so on. Any kind of organic manure is good.

Should I add compost?

Using compost as part of the mix is a great way to get the system jumpstarted. One wheelbarrowfull of rough compost per hundred square feet is sufficient to get things going. Using burlap that was used last year is also a good way to inoculate your mulch. The used sacks are full of dormant organisms just waiting to go to work.

How much material should I use? Depending on your soil needs, the mulch can be 6 to 18 inches deep. Make sure all materials are damp before covering with burlap.

Do I just walk away and leave it for the winter after covering with burlap?

Check for moisture during the winter. If materials dry out decomposition comes to a halt. You can also feed your mulch during the winter like a worm bin. Adding materials once the mulch is active makes it work even better. You will have fun checking your mulch through the winter. The biology is fascinating. You will have given birth to billions of trillions of organisms. Some you can even see!

When can I plant in the spring?

If you start your mulch in October you should have rich humus to plant into by March. If you started with 12" of mulch you will end up with 2-3 inches of soil-energizing humus.

Do I till it in or just plant into it?

Gardeners do both successfully.