

Compost & Mulch Will Help Lower Water Use

– by Joan Morris

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In California, says UC Berkeley soils scientist Steve Andrews, brown is the new green, and that requires changing not only how we think about our landscapes, but how we tend them as well.

Andrews, speaking to **Our Garden**, says one way to conserve water is by using compost and mulch to hold moisture in the soil. We may have been doing that, but Andrews has a better way.



Soils scientist Steve Andrews, left, talks about using compost and mulch to retain moisture in your soil. (Joan Morris/BayArea News Group)

Here are some of his tips:

The lasagna method

- For ornamental beds, start by spreading a layer of fine compost over the planting beds. The compost should be a quarter of an inch up to 3/8ths of an inch in size. The layer should be an inch thick. Don't dig it in. To ensure better moisture retention, avoid disturbing the soil as much as possible.
- Next, add a second layer of compost, also about an inch thick, on top of the first. The size of the pieces in the compost should be slightly larger.
- Step three is to spread a third layer of compost, coarser than the other two, an inch thick.
- Next, add a layer of newspapers, about 20 sheets thick.
- Step five is to start layering mulch. Like the compost, the first layer should be of smaller sized pieces, a half inch up to an inch in size.
- Next, add a second layer of slightly larger chips, 1-2½ inches in size.
- Lastly, add a third layer using the largest size chips, up to 3 inches. If you're really invested, Andrews says, you can add a fourth layer of mulch that is up to 5 inches in size.

- You now have created a blanket over your soil that keep moisture in and feed the soil.

Ditch the lawn

- California is a dry state that has had periods of being less dry. But face it, Andrews says, they call California golden because it goes brown every spring. Lawns simply don't fit in with our climate, and we need to weed it out of our culture.
- Go home right now, Andrews says, and kill your lawn. Replace with native plants that know how California works.
- If you can't live without some green out front, use native grasses that require little water.
- Simply getting rid of your lawn will help you make that 25 percent or more reduction in water every Californian is being asked to make.
- The best and easiest way to kill your lawn is by sheet mulching. Mow it, leaving the grass clippings in place and cover the lawn with about 2 inches of compost and water it. Next, cover the area with overlapping layers of newspaper or cardboard, and then add several inches of mulch on top of that.
- The grass will die because it will receive no sunlight, the compost will feed the soil to create a rich growing bed, and the mulch will retain moisture. In a few weeks or months, the area can be planted with low-water users.

Vertical composting

- Trees can benefit from compost, too, and Andrews uses what he calls vertical composting.
- Start by using an auger or post hole digger to dig four holes 2 feet from the tree in a cross pattern with the tree at the center. Then move other another couple of feet and dig four more holes between the first four. Repeat that another couple of feet out, creating a radial of sorts. The holes should be 18 to 24 inches deep.
- Next, fill the holes with compost and cover with mulch. When you water, the water will flow into the holes and help feed the soil, which will then feed the tree.

General tips

- The lazy way may be the best way. If you create a healthy soil, there is no need to dig it up to aerate it. The microbes will do that for you.
- You can use the lasagna method for composting and mulching in vegetable beds, but don't use the bigger pieces of mulch. You'll just have to rake them off when you plant. But all growing beds and containers benefit from compost and mulch.
- Practice the drop and chop method. When pruning or trimming plants, leave the clippings where they fall. They will break down and return nutrients to the soil, and they serve as a nice mulch. Cut them into differently sized pieces to improve their ability to hold moisture in the ground. Don't practice this method with diseased plants.

Our Garden offers free classes at 10 a.m. every Wednesday from April through October. Master Gardeners are available to answer questions, and a large selection of seedlings is available. All produce grown at the garden is donated to the Monument Crisis Center in Concord.

The garden is at Wiget Lane and Shadelands Drive, Walnut Creek.