

Uncle Thomas's Gardening Column

This morning was cool and sunny... just a hint of frost in the air, but it promises to be a fine day so I'll not want to spend much of it indoors. This is the kind of weather the missus used to look forward to all winter, for she knew she'd get me out from under her feet and out of the house.

I went to a newly opened gardening centre the other day. Wanted to see what was in demand these days. Wandering through the perennial display was like going back to mother's garden; Bleeding Heart, Canterbury Bells, Foxglove, Lupines, Violets, Lily-of-the-Valley, and my wife's favourite, Pansy, to name a few. Then I wandered over to the vines and shrubs and was pleasantly surprised to see Wisteria, Honey Suckle and Virginia Creeper amongst the vines and the old favourites such as Spirea, Snow Ball and Forsythia with the shrubs. Had to smile at the Stag Horn Sumach they were selling in the ornamental tree section. My, the number of those I've pulled from the fields. Just goes to prove that a weed is only a plant growing where its not wanted.

Came across plastic sacks of Cocoa Shell mulch. The nursery people had used this all around their plantings, surrounding each shrub or tree with an attractive pinkish hue-d ground cover. Looked very smart. And mulching is smart.

When you spread mulch on your garden and flower bed, you not only conserve the moisture in the ground, but you reduce the number of times you have to water the garden, even in the driest year. Mulching keeps the weeds from growing, keeps the dirt from splashing up onto the crop when it rains and keeps the crop cleaner when harvested. It protects crops that tend to sprawl on the ground, such as tomatoes, melons, cucumbers and reduces the chances of rot. It maintains an even soil temperature, keeping the ground cooler during the summer heat and warmer longer into the fall. It encourages earth worms, which in turn convert the rotting plant matter in your garden into its basic elements, especially phosphorous and iron, making these elements available to your plants. And as the mulch decomposes, it improves the tilth and fertility of the soil.

Mulch before you plant. You can spread the mulch apart to plant your rows of seeds, replacing it as the plants sprout. For setting in plants, just make a space large enough to get the plant into the soil, then tuck the mulch back around it. Mulching after the garden is planted and growing is not impossible, but is certainly a lot more work and the object of using mulch is, in part, to reduce the amount of work your garden requires.

If you haven't mulched your garden before, you should add extra nitrogen. The organisms that decompose the mulch, use nitrogen to start this process, robbing it from

the nearest available source, the top layer of soil. Since you want nitrogen for your plants, you should add a nitrogen rich fertilizer to the garden before putting on the mulch. Don't be afraid to use a thick covering of mulch. A friend of mine grumbled to me one day that he put mulch on his garden every year and all he got for his troubles was healthy weeds. I went over one spring to watch what he was doing and saw that he only put about three inches of mulch over the garden. This was soon tramped down, and the weeds had no trouble getting through it. If you are using hay or straw for mulch, this should be put on at least eight to twelve inches thick.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. There are many materials you can use as mulch, depending on the effect you are trying for. If its to mulch around trees and shrubs and set off these plantings, the cocoa shells I saw at the garden centre, grass clippings, shredded paper or layers of newspaper, hay or straw, shredded leaves and coffee grounds are all good and you need not add nitrogen. Any wood product such as wood chips, shredded bark or sawdust as well as ground corn cobs, if used for mulch should first have nitrogen added to the soil.

You may want use coloured pebbles as a mulch. This won't add anything to your soil, and you may want to remove the stones at some time or other. Place several thicknesses of newspaper under the pebbles. The newspaper will act as the mulch, the pebbles will hold the papers in place and should you ever want to remove the pebbles, they can be easily scraped off the paper. This also makes an expensive bag of coloured pebbles do at least twice as much coverage.

Now here's a hint for mulching and sweeter muskmelons. Plant them through black plastic. Muskmelons like hot soil and the black plastic will meet this need, making the difference between a mediocre melon and a top quality sweet one. Ask at the garden centres where they have been using soil that comes in black plastic bags, for the old bags. You have helped by re-using a plastic that would otherwise be thrown away, and the bag if you roll it up in the fall and store it away will do for several years. Sure beats the tar paper I used to use.

By the by, that black gardeners cloth is not as good as it's made out to be. It's expensive and the same or better effect can be attained by using any number of other materials, some of them, such as newspaper, free for the using.

A good adage to recall as you are gardening, is use your head instead of your back, and mulching surely fits that requirement.

Happy gardening!