

GREEN INVESTMENT – old style

Tarps – Not Conspiracy Just a Cover Up

Recent bank failures remind us of the larger bank and mortgage failures of 2008. Then, in an effort to keep the American economy from imploding, the US Government brought in the T.A.R.P program (Troubled Asset Relief Program). They used tax revenue to buy almost worthless assets so that financial institutions could throw off their debt burden and begin to regrow the economy with more fruitful investments.

At our home we have our own TARP program to prepare the ground to grow food—usually with large sheets of plastic. The fruits and vegetables we all favour today have been bred to channel their energies into the aspects we desire...large tomatoes, long carrots, sweet grapes. This specialization results in their being at a competitive disadvantage to many well-rounded plants a.k.a. weeds.

So, to change an area from weeds and grass, to soil suited to a new garden we begin by spreading out tarps. The tarps perform a variety of tasks—blocking sunlight, shedding rain, raising soil temperatures. If left to cover the surface for months this will eliminate most of the earlier plants.

If we get organized, we spread the tarps in early fall and remove them in the following late spring. We've found the regular blue/green woven type tarps, the type always on sale in hardware stores, begin to deteriorate from sunlight after only two years. The heavy duty polyurethane ones are better and can be reused for several years.

The best plastic tarps though are the ones used to wrap round hay bales. This silage wrap is light weight, inexpensive and treated to resist ultra violet light decay. Avoid using any plastic that is so degraded as to leave fragments in the soil. In small areas we might forego tarps and instead just spread out old sheets of plywood or used sheets of metal roofing to serve

the same purpose. For short-term treatment in a small area, cardboard and newspaper covered with straw also works well.

If the area had a thick mat of weeds and grass even a year under a tarp may not be sufficient to eliminate unwanted vegetation—there likely remain viable roots beneath the soil and many dormant seeds. The now mostly bare ground is easily loosened up with a shallow-set rototiller or even just hoes and rakes. On the bright side this can remove most of the old roots and stalks but on the dark side it will bring new weed seeds to the surface where they will sprout. A light raking at this point removes most of these tiny new weeds and you could start growing.

If we are feeling ambitious and wish to further suppress unwanted growth, while also building soil nutrients, plant a cover crops such as buckwheat or sorghum. These plants grow quickly to aggressively smother the previous seed bank and their long root systems pull up essential nutrients from deep down. Mix in some clover to capture airborne nitrogen. In late summer we cut and compost the cover crops before they go to seed and then once again lightly till their roots.

Finally, in fall another round of cover crops, usually oats and forage radish to add more fertility. Their roots capture loose soil nutrients so that they don't wash away with snow melt and spring rain. The winter cold will eventually kill this final cover crop and release their nutrients leaving the soil ready to support a new garden.

These stages ensure that the soil microorganisms and beneficial insects remain healthy (something that would be largely lost from heavy tilling and herbicide

applications).

As well, the cover crops will have built up the soil nutrients to feed a healthful and verdant crop. You may feel overwhelmed just thinking about all this work but fear not, you've got this covered (up), ...and when you finally plant...don't spill the beans.



- By Robin Reilly

At their Black River Forest Garden, the Reilly's raise many types of plants and animals within a larger project to restore a diverse meadow and forest landscape.

