

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

Mulching out loud

BY SIOUX ROGERS

Mulching comes in basically two flavors: “vanilla” (organic) and “chocolate” (inorganic). Since my preference is vanilla, this is what I will basically be discussing. One quick comment on chocolate mulch: I was recently reprimanded by “lower management” (hubby) because I wanted to use old tarps, shower curtains, large plastic sheets or synthetic rugs to mulch away weeds (i.e., death by asphyxiation).

As for the above “fake” mulches, “lower management” disallowed (i.e., nixed) my using them anywhere on the property for weed control or otherwise—whatever “otherwise” includes—because they break down, leaving a trail of toxins to permeate the soil.

Although organic in itself is good, arm yourself with knowledge as to the various types of organic mulches. This is not a “one-size-fits-all” deal. All mulches are not the same and not all mulches are good for all plants. Also be mindful of *how* you mulch. When mulching around the trunk or base of plants, mulch of any type should *not* touch or pile up next to the plant base. Mulch usually holds moisture. If it is covering the stalk or tree trunk, eventually rot will happen. One exception would be mulching for winter protection of a tender plant. (Of course you would remember to remove it with the first warm days. *You* wouldn't want to be wrapped in a blanket all summer, would you?)

Before I roam off into the twilight, how about I just mention what mulch is all about. The following few paragraphs are from Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mulch>):

“A mulch is a layer of material applied

to the surface of an area of soil. Its purpose is any or all of the following: to conserve moisture, to improve the fertility and health of the soil, to reduce weed growth, to enhance the visual appeal of the area.”

Organic mulches

“Organic mulches decay over time and are temporary. The way a particular organic mulch decomposes and reacts to wetting by rain and dew affects its usefulness.”

“A variety of materials are used as mulch. Organic residues: grass clippings, leaves, hay straw, kitchen scraps, comfrey, shredded bark, whole bark nuggets, sawdust, shells, wood chips, shredded newspaper, cardboard, wood and animal

manure, etc. Many of these materials also act as a direct composting system, such as the mulched clippings of a mulching lawn mower or other organics applied as sheet composting.”

Okay, now for my own thoughts and opinions. Some gardeners absolutely feel that rotten leaves are the only and the best mulch. Others lay down their hoe and rake for straw. In my lifetime of gardening, I have used everything including old ratty wool rugs. I cannot imagine rows of slippery straw between our raised vegetable beds any more than I can imagine concrete in our poultry scratching area.

With all my reading and attempting to pull together the importance and types of mulch, I never once (probably just missed it) saw mention of one of my best friends, rice hulls! See if you can follow this. We have chickens, geese and ducks. Inside their king-size sleeping suite is a concrete floor (not their scratching area), covered with rice hulls. This keeps the floor dry from you-know-what-birds-do. When the rice hulls are icky enough with chicken, duck and geese droppings, I shovel it all into a wheelbarrow and mix it into the soil in the raised beds. I have been doing this for years, and the soil is very happy. You might be about to ask, “Isn't the chicken poop too hot?” First off, there is not that much poop since it is mixed with rice hulls and soil. Second, I do not plant in the poopy rice hulls and soil immediately (usually it takes around two to three months for it to “cool” down enough).

This spring when I began planting my cole crops (cabbage, broccoli, kale, etc.), I was too lazy



Sioux Rogers—And the beet goes on.

or tired to dig the rice hulls into the soil. So, there the hulls sat, butt-naked on top of the soil. As usual, I placed each small new plant inside the now-famous clear three-inch bottom cut out of plastic cups. A few years ago when I first started using the clear plastic cups it was for slug control, but I still needed to go outside for several nights with a flashlight and clippers to do away with those wee slimy leaf-n-plant eaters. This season, I did my nightly ritual but saw no slugs. The seedlings did fine, now growing over the top of the cups.

Several weeks ago I found a few more cole crops I wanted to plant. So back to the raised garden beds with the rice hulls sitting on top. Dang! Ran out of clear cups and not about to run back to the store! A light went on in my head. Maybe the wee slimy leaf-eating slugs did not like their bellies scratched by the rice hulls—aha! I decided to experiment and planted the last cool-weather crops without the plastic cup barrier. So far there has been no difference between hulls on top of the soil or dug into the soil. This could be worth a closer look as a time-and-money saver.

This article was written for “lower management” about how rice hulls keep away the little slugs and are a great “vanilla” mulch.

Dirty fingernails and all
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Apparently rice hulls deterred the wee slugs' appetite for leaves, even though plastic cup barriers were not used.

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