

DIRTY FINGERNAILS AND ALL

# This is a dirty cover-up story

BY SIOUX ROGERS



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“Hmmm, sounds interesting. Are you covering up with a big old trench coat? Or bib overalls?”

Actually, I am using old sleeping bags, old blankets, old rugs, cardboard, old clothes, stacks of newspaper, *poop*—in abundance (from animals, that is). Sure, I have forgotten half of the cover-ups, but not to worry, will remember later. I am a hard-core mulcher.

Predictions of severe drought have made me take notice of the water requirements in my garden. I have a very thirsty garden, I embarrassingly admit. It is very lush.

Mulch is used for many reasons. I am most interested in moisture retention and weed control. Aside from those two purposes, mulching has numerous (definition of “numerous” is more toes and fingers than I have for counting) benefits, such as keeping foot traffic from compacting the soil, making sure plants aren’t splashed by mud with water on non-porous soil, and preventing soil erosion.

Anyhow, what is “mulch”?

Mulch is a layer of organic, or inorganic, material spread over the surface of ground.

Considering just the organic kind, not plastic, rubber, or something else not made by Mum Nature—organic mulches will eventually break down. This makes the soil a lovely place for micro-nutrients



Left photo: To keep your soil from doing this... Right photo: ...it helps to do this: Cover the soil with mulch (straw, in this case)!

Photos: Via Wikimedia Commons (left) and Yahoo Images.

and earthworms (my favorite in-the-dirt friends). Mulching is a win-win activity. Worms have a new menu for dining, and the underground soil is friable and nourished while you just glow at your glorious, functional, and healthy garden. You may notice your sandy soil, after a short while, holds together and retains water. Your clay soil now is soft and fluffy, and water does not run off. This is an indication of healthy and friable soil.

Mulches I have known and loved (no snickering please) include carrot pulp left over from carrot juice, and okara, a waste product from soy. To clarify: I got truckloads of carrot pulp from a juice factory. It is fabulous mulch. The okara was from the not-there-any-more tofu factory in Ashland. Okay, so those were weird. Here are some of the other organic mulches I have or could have used: straw from the chicken coop, rice hulls, all kinds



of animal manure, leaves, grass clippings, wood chips, horse stable gleanings, cardboard, and newspaper.

When I mulch, I usually aim for a two-inch cover. I like to mulch everywhere I see the need. So what makes me jump into *mulch* mode? Cracked ground, for one thing, is a “get-to-it” sign that grabs my attention. Areas where I cannot seem to keep the vegetation happy because it’s always thirsty are another indication mulch is needed. These are all indications of lack of organic matter in the soil, so... I *mulch*.

I idolize Ruth Stout, who wrote *How to Have a Green Thumb Without an*

*Aching Back*. Her secret? Mulching. So let’s mulch. Your garden’s overall health may be dependent on this “exercise.”

Mulching is not all just la-de-da perfect and free from concern. For example, mulching with an organic material, say grass clippings filled with weed seeds, is not a great idea, as they (the weed seeds) will be very happy and grow. Mulching with wet and compacted organic material, such as grass (again), can have the opposite effect from your planned agenda. The grass can mat down, making it difficult for water to penetrate. It can draw nutrients from the soil as it decays. It may become very odiferous as it is decaying. (That was just a “grassroots” example; make sure your mulch is dry.)

As for the opening paragraph, mentioning my mulching with old sleeping bags, rugs, and trench coats, let’s clarify. I do not mulch with old underwear in my vegetable garden, flower garden, or front lawn. I use the old rags, rugs, blankets, etc., for large areas where I want to eliminate (ha ha ha) weeds. This area could be the large spaces, as in my rose garden, or the flat space in my “other” garden. You get the idea? *Mulch* for water’s sake, it is a *win-win*.

“Gardening is cheaper than therapy and you get tomatoes.”

Sioux Rogers

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