

Mulch: Saving you Time and Money

I've got mulch on my mind! Daytime temperatures in the mid 30's made for a restless Tuesday night as a hot, dry wind rattled leaves, blew down a neighbour's tree, and kept sleep at bay. Trying to count sheep, images of bare soil patches and wilting plants pursued me instead. And Wednesday promised higher temperatures with expected rain still a few days away. So, by 6 am the dogs and I were out examining the most vulnerable spots, and, while the berg wind swirled around us, we raced the sun to top up the mulch layer around the watsonias, *Merwillia*, and *Cyanotis* in a new grassland bed. In a damper section, just beginning their lives among the *Aristea ecklonii* and *Gerbera ambigua*, *Alepidea amatymbica*, *Ornithogalum juncifolium* and *Kniphofia pauciflora*, were tucked up against the drying wind and sun. We even pampered spaces between young *Glottiphyllum* and a newly split patch of *Bergeranthus* with an extra layer of partially decomposed leaves collected through winter. And areas where winter succulents like *Crassula alba* and *C. capitella* had retreated or thinned.

So much (mulch?) for spring; it feels like mid-summer.

As if to reinforce just how much water is lost to evaporation, a rectangular drip tray used as a bird bath by robins, thrushes and pigeons, was bone-dry by midday. It sits in dappled shade beneath a Flatcrown, but, at the start of spring, the branches are bare of leaves, and the sun streams through. Uncovered soil will suffer the same volumes of water loss, so you'll also need to watch out for normally shaded beds that are exposed to the winter and early spring sun.

So, what's new regarding mulch?

We should all know by now that a generous mulch layer benefits our garden soil by reducing water loss while improving water infiltration and retention; providing nutrients as soil organisms work the material into the profile; reducing erosion and compaction; moderating soil temperatures.

This organic blanket, though, has much more to offer the time-pressed and cash-strapped gardener; it reduces time spent weeding, and the need for pesticide and fertiliser too.

Here's how:

1. A thick mulch blanket blocks light necessary for growth from reaching weed seeds, thus reducing germination. So, no herbicides - or back-breaking weeding chores.
2. Fewer weeds mean plants have less competition for soil resources like nutrients and water; so, less need for fertilisers – and watering.
3. An organic mulch layer creates perfect conditions for beneficial microbes and other soil organisms that compete with pathogens and pests; still no need for fungicide or insecticide!
4. This protective layer will be home to predatory insects, doing away with the need (should your trigger finger feel the itch) for harmful insecticides.

5. Organic mulches are the perfect slow-release nutrient system, providing sufficient natural food without recourse to handfuls of fertiliser pellets dispensed according to a human timetable.
6. Finally, they provide just the right environment in which beneficial mycorrhizae fungi that live on plant roots will thrive. These fungi help plants take up the available soil nutrients, again, limiting any need for scoops of pellets from a plastic packet.

There's just one caveat; if you use any poisons on your lawn or plant foliage do not add cuttings to the compost heap or mulch layer. Scientists suggest that products, like broad-leaf weed killers commonly used on lawns, remain effective in these cuttings, and can harm other plants.

Mercifully, light rain and cooler temperatures arrived in the early hours of Thursday morning, and there is a promise of a generous soaking for the dry ground. Holding thumbs.