

HOME AND GARDEN 2013 - The Smother Effect

Sheet mulching is a cheap and easy method of eco-friendly weed murder.

By [Kera Abraham](#)

Thursday, April 4, 2013

The vision: a sweet little plot of drought-tolerant lawn for my kid to play on.

The reality: 320 square feet of stinging nettle dominating what was supposed to be a carpet of freshly seeded blue fescue.

On to Plan B – sheet mulching, an eco-friendly way to smother those nettles to death. It’s also a common method for replacing water-hungry conventional lawns and amending sandy soil.

“It is a very affordable, nontoxic and DIY-friendly way of either losing the lawn, smothering weeds or enhancing a landscape,” says Kimberle Herring, public education coordinator for Monterey Regional Waste Management District.

For guidance, we turn to local sheet-mulching master Sherry Lee Bryan, co-owner of California Horticulture Services and green gardener coordinator for Santa Cruz nonprofit Ecology Action. Bryan recently led a sheet-mulching workshop at the district landfill in north Marina.

Her steps for successful sheet mulching:

- 1.** Identify which zones you want to sheet mulch. Cap your sprinklers, or convert them to drip irrigation.
- 2.** Mow down tall weeds. You may want to pull some of the biggest, woodiest ones by hand.
- 3.** Create an edge around the lawn in spots where it borders hardscaped areas like sidewalks. (This helps keep compost and mulch you will add later from spilling over.) With a flat-edged shovel, dig about three inches down and 1 foot in from the concrete.
- 4.** Plant anything that’s in a 5-gallon-or-bigger pot. (Smaller plants can be dug in after the mulching.) This is best done in the fall to take advantage of winter rains. Also optional at this stage: a layer of compost over the weeds.
- 5.** Spread the cardboard barrier. You can use broken-down boxes sourced from neighborhood shops; appliance and bike stores are great because they’ve got big ones. Make sure you’ve taken tape and stickers off the cardboard so it doesn’t resurface as trash. Don’t use boxes with glossy paper, which may contain heavy metals. You can sub newspaper or burlap for the cardboard, but avoid plastic and non-biodegradable weed fabric. Overlap the pieces by 6-8 inches; weeds will find their way through any cracks.

- 6.** Water the cardboard as you go. It'll help keep your barrier in place, make it easier to shape around existing plants and jump-start decomposition. Mold the wet cardboard over the lip of your edging.
- 7.** Optional: Add a 1-inch layer of compost on top of the cardboard, especially if your primary goal is to build soil and install small plantings.
- 8.** Layer mulch on top. You can buy wood chips at the waste district landfill and area nurseries; or you can get it, often free, from a local tree service. (Check www.omexchange.org for listings.) If a weed-free new lawn is your goal, sub sod for the mulch layer. In this semi-arid zone, it's wise to go with a drought-tolerant grass.
- 9.** Once the compost-and-mulch layer is 4-6 inches deep, plant any smaller plants.
- 10.** Enjoy your lawn-free landscaping! The cardboard breaks down within about a year, so it's best to make sheet-mulching an annual ritual.