Meopham and District Allotments

Southdown Shaw

MULCH

What is a mulch?

A mulch can be organic – composted garden waste, grass clippings, cow manure or stable material from horses. It may be alive – several plant species can be grown as a mulch, in addition to acting as a green manure. Mulches can also be inorganic, for example horticultural fleece can be used as a floating mulch.

Purpose – the main reason for using a mulch is to provide a protective layer over the soil surface. A 7cm layer of organic mulch will provide an insulative layer, regulating the temperature of the soil – if it is laid when the soil is frozen, it will remain frozen, but if warm it will retain this heat, enabling crops to be sown earlier or provide extra heat for optimum growth. A mulch once laid, will absorb heat if the material is dark in colour, in addition to reducing the rate of evaporation – a huge benefit to crops as water is becoming a precious commodity (both in time to apply and the cost financially). In addition, weeds will be supressed and erosion is reduced. So, an organic mulch provides the following benefits;

- Regulates the temperature of the soil
- Reduces the need for watering
- Supresses weeds
- Reduces soil degradation
- Improves soil structure by 'feeding' soil organisms

Other benefits

Organic mulches will eventually rot down and improve the structure of the soil. Carboniferous mulches, such as composted leaves will improve the water holding capacity of the soil, but will add no nutrients. A mulch that includes material that has decomposed from green leafy material (grass clippings) will also add nutrients, such as Nitrogen. Farm Yard manure will add a range of variety of Nutrients, but

they will be variable and could contain weed seed. The best is reported to be Cow Manure as ruminants are more likely to break down weed seeds.

Bananas provide Potassium – excellent for fruit production
Comfrey – excellent for a range of nutrients.

Inorganic mulches

Horticultural fleece is used as a 'floating mulch' protecting crops from the drying effects of wind, reducing evaporation of water and supressing weeds by physically stopping seeds from settling on the soil. It also offers some protection against some pests, such as Flea beetle and Carrot Root Fly.

Geotextile membranes, such as Mypex can be laid on un-used land to stop soil degradation and erosion. If also offers some protection from weed seeds and stops the emergence of perennial weeds by denying light (essential for growth – photosynthesis)