The background of the entire image is a close-up, top-down view of a thick layer of wood chip mulch. The chips are light brown and vary in size and orientation, creating a textured, natural-looking surface.

WIN YOUR WEED WAR

USING THE MULCH METHOD FOR HIGHER YIELDS AND FEWER WEEDS



JILL WINGER



INTRODUCTION

Gardening and I had a Falling Out

My storm of frustration had been brewing for a while, but I finally threw up my hands during the summer of 2013 when my best of intentions turned into a thick carpet of weeds before my poor little seeds even had a chance to push up out of the soil.

It just wasn't fair. I was doing everything I was "supposed" to do, but I still couldn't make it work, no matter how hard I tried.

Our homestead lies in the southeast corner of Wyoming. Gardening in this area isn't for the faint of heart. Our falls, winters, and springs are battered with high winds on almost a daily basis. Our winters are long and severe, and drought is common. Sounds like a great place to garden, huh? In spite of these challenges, I had somehow stumbled along with semi-successful gardens in the past. Admittedly, I had spent a lot of time out among the rows, but my to-do list was much shorter back then, so my schedule allowed it.

However, my little bit of gardening success came to a screeching halt in 2012. Poor compost management was to blame, as I had unknowingly tilled a batch of compost into my soil which was only partially composted. It must have contained no less than a million weed seeds. I was doomed for failure, and fail I did... Miserably.

The weeds overtook the weak seedlings nearly overnight, and even though I was spending hours and hours weeding each week, my efforts were entirely futile. I was losing the battle. As a mother (at that point I had a busy two-year old, and another on the way), a homesteader (with other parts of my homestead to care for), and a blogger (who needed to write posts each week and answer emails), it was impossible for me to spend four hours per day in the garden. Just impossible.

And then there was the watering... Many weeks I would set the sprinkler on the garden daily, yet my plants would still wilt before the next day. The scorching winds and blazing temperatures were no match for my measly sprinkler.

As a very public homesteading advocate, it was... embarrassing.

And I was ready to throw in the towel and focus on aspects of homesteading where I wasn't a complete failure.

THEN I MET RUTH STOUT...



Well, met her through the pages of her book, that is.

I inherited a pile of gardening books from my grandfather's estate. I didn't pay much attention to the musty smelling volume, as the outdated cover appeared completely irrelevant to anything I was doing at the time. I relegated it to a dark corner of my basement and promptly forgot it existed.

Until... My complete and utter gardening desperation drove me to the internet. I began to research various "alternative" gardening methods (because, let's face it... the whole traditional route just plain wasn't working for me anymore), and the name "Ruth Stout" began to pop up again and again.

I decided I simply must have her book. I began to scour the internet for a copy, but when I pulled it up on Amazon, I noticed the cover looked strangely familiar. Much to my chagrin, I realized it was the exact same volume I had buried in my basement.

[The Ruth Stout No-Work Garden Book by Ruth Stout and Richard Clemence](#) was originally written in 1971, yet her methods are still widely respected to this day. Ruth was quite revolutionary in her time, and didn't care what the "conventional" gardening gurus were saying about her unorthodox method. I was immediately drawn to her sassy style of writing-- I think she and I would have gotten along just fine.

I had been curious about the idea of mulching for a while, but this humble little book was the push I needed to finally take action. The idea of a bare-dirt garden has always felt a little funny to me, since bare patches of dirt aren't common in nature (and if they are present, then it usually means something is wrong...) I became convinced that mulch was the answer to my gardening woes. I started dreaming about mountains of hay and straw and endless baskets of veggies...



HOW TO START WITH DEEP MULCH

First off, let me start by saying there are a LOT of different schools of thought on mulching and dozens of different techniques.

I don't think there is any one "right" way to grow a garden, and I am finally coming to the realization that gardening success depends on a wide variety of factors (soil, climate, etc) and the gardener's ability to adjust accordingly.

How We Converted Our Traditional Garden to a Deep Mulch Garden

1. We started in the spring, so we covered our existing garden plot with a layer of compost, and tilled it (hopefully for the last time!)

2. Next, I spread a very thick layer (8-10" thick) of hay all over the garden. **Thickness is key.** I chose hay as my mulching medium since it is readily available to us, but you can also use straw, leaves, grass clippings, etc

3. After spreading the hay thickly over the entire garden, I decided where I wanted to put my rows and parted the hay in those areas, leaving an exposed strip of dirt.

4. I planted the seeds directly in the dirt, just like normal. As the seedlings popped up, I pulled the mulch around them to block weeds and conserve water. I also checked the garden periodically to see if I needed to add additional mulch to any bare spots.

5. At the end of the season after everything was harvested, I covered the entire plot with a fresh layer of hay. We'll let it sit over the winter, and start again in the spring!

Fair Warning: It feels entirely bizarre to bury your garden with hay at first. But have faith!



Benefits of Mulch

- Deep mulch reduces the amount of water the garden needs – By shielding the soil from the hot sun and decreasing evaporation, mulched gardens may need up to 50% less irrigation.
- Deep mulch acts as a natural weed barrier – thereby greatly reducing the amount of weeds in your garden
- Deep mulch can help to warm or cool the soil
- Deep mulch can help to stabilize soil moisture levels, which improves vegetable quality and aids in the beneficial activity of soil organisms
- Deep mulch reduces soil compaction
- Deep mulch can provide beneficial organic matter and fertilizer to the soil
- Deep mulch can help to reduce the amount of time you have to spend in the garden

MULCH MAINTENANCE

I felt downright neglectful about how much time I didn't spend in the garden during my first year mulching... In year's past, I could easily spend hours each day weeding and preening. But with my newfound method, there just isn't much for me to do once the mulch is in place.

Here's what my daily garden tasks look like:

1. Check the mulch to make sure it hasn't scooted over the top of any seedlings and re-adjust as needed. (This isn't an issue once the seedlings get bigger, but it's wise to watch during the beginning of the season when they are still spindly and fragile)
2. Water as needed (I ended up only watering about twice per week)
3. If any weeds are popping up (there won't be many!), pull them or cover them with more mulch.
4. Take a deep breath and actually enjoy being in your garden!



How much mulch will I need?

It depends on the size of your plot and the type of mulch you plan to use. To ensure your mulch layer is thick enough, it will probably take more than you think. In *The Ruth Stout No-Work Gardening Book*, Richard Clemence offers the following estimation:

"25 bales of hay at 50 pounds each would be about the minimum for an area of 50 feet by 50 feet, or about a half ton of loose hay."

Watering

With my deep mulch, I only watered about twice per week. The hay kept the underlying soil moist and soft, even when everything else outside was blazing hot. This saved me a lot of hassle and seriously cut down on our water usage.

Since the rows are bare dirt, they do dry out a bit faster. However, once the seedlings are big enough, you can pull the mulch around them to hold in even more moisture.

I used a simple rotary sprinkler, although I'm sure soaker hoses would work just as well.

Weeding

THIS, my friends, is the best part of the whole endeavor!

Usually by mid-June I'm knee-deep in weeds and losing the battle. But not with mulch on my side.

Mulching nearly eliminated weeding for me. Yes, you do have to weed a bit in between the plants in the rows, but that's it. Weeding only takes a few minutes each day. This is huge!

If weeds do pop up, it's generally because the mulch layer is too thin, so simply cover up any thin spots with a couple handfuls of hay, and call it good.

There were a few stubborn thistles that managed to push through my mulch layer, but they are easy to pluck, as long as I wear gloves.

I've had a lot of folks tell me that using hay for mulch is a bad idea, since hay contains so many seeds. However, there are no hay seeds germinating anywhere in my garden--the thick mulch layer prevents that from happening.

I don't plan to till the hay into the ground, but rather keep adding more layers as time goes by.



Types of Mulch

Different mulches provide different benefits, so there is plenty of room to experiment. Just keep in mind that you need a LOT of whatever mulch you decide to use.

- Hay – this is my favorite option since it is easy to find old, moldy hay in our area
- Straw
- Leaves
- Grass Clippings -- apply grass clippings in thin layers until they have a chance to dry. Avoid using clippings from lawns that have been sprayed with herbicides or pesticides
- Sawdust or Wood chips -- be very cautious with wood chips, and avoid tilling them into your soil. Decomposing wood can prevent your seeds from germinating
- Plastic or fabric weed barriers – I'm not a fan of plastic or fabric barriers since they don't decompose. One of the main benefits of using organic materials is that they feed the soil as they break down.

GNIGHT GARDEN

Our gardening season is complete and everything has been harvested. I left many of the plant remnants in place covered the entire garden plot with a generous blanket of hay for the winter. The plan is for the plant matter and hay to begin decomposing and to create a whole new layer of nutritious-goodness for next year.

Come spring, I'll pull the hay back from where I plan to place my rows to allow the soil to warm up. And we'll start the process all over again. I can't wait!



Deep Mulch: The Condensed Version

1. Spread a heavy layer of mulching material (approximately 8" deep) over your entire garden.
2. Decide where your rows will be and pull back the mulch in those areas.
3. Plant your seeds and seedlings directly in the dirt, just like normal.
4. As the seeds and seedlings mature, pull the mulch around them to hold in moisture and reduce weeds.
5. Add more mulch as needed.



FAQS



Q: Won't the hay cause a massive influx of weed and grass seeds in my garden?

A: If your mulch layer is thick enough, the hay seeds will be smothered and unable to germinate. I didn't have any problems with hay seeds at all. If you are having trouble with weeds of any kind, it means your mulch layer is not thick enough.

Q: When should I start mulching?

A: According to Ruth Stout, the answer is NOW! If it's the dead of winter, I suggest at least making plans on how you'll procure your mulching materials so you're ready to roll come spring.

Q: So do I plant IN the mulch?

A: No—you'll plant like you always do—in the dirt. Just pull back the mulch layers so you have access to the soil underneath.

Q: Eight inches of mulch sounds like a crazy amount! Can't I just use less?

A: When I first spread my hay, I was slightly shocked at how bulky it was. However, within 24 hours it had already settle considerably, and continued to settle to just a few inches thick. You can try using less mulch if you like, but in my garden, thinner layers tend to allow too many weeds to pop through.

Q: Do I need to till my garden before applying the mulch?

A: It depends. We did, mainly because our soil had been left bare all winter and was hard as a rock. However, if your plot is soft enough, you can probably skip the tilling.

Q: Will this method prevent me from tilling in the future?

A: That's the idea! Our goal is to convert our garden to a no-till format, and simply allow the subsequent layers of mulch to decompose and create nutritious layers in the soil.

Q: Won't the deep mulch prevent my soil from warming up in the spring?

A: Maybe or maybe not. It depends on the mulching material, soil, and climate. However, if you are



concerned, simply pull back the mulch in the areas where you plan to place your rows to allow the sun to heat the soil.

Q: Won't the mulch blow away?

A: Honestly, this was my husband's biggest concern, considering 60+ MPH winds are fairly common in Wyoming. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the mulch wasn't affected by the wind much at all. Even after severe windstorms, it only took a few little adjustments to get the mulch layer back to normal.

Q: Do I till the hay in after my garden is finished for the year?

A: No. I suggest never tilling in the hay—that is how you end up with a massive weed problem.

Q: Can I use wood chips instead of hay or straw?

A: Yes, it's possible to mulch with wood chips, and some people have had wonderful results with this method. However, I've heard (and experienced) enough issues with wood in other areas of my garden that I felt safer just using hay this year. Wood chips can be slow to decompose and may tie up nitrogen in the process. Also, if you do plan to use wood chips, I would advise never tilling the chips into the soil, but rather simply allow them to sit on top if you chose this route.



LESSONS I LEARNED THE HARD WAY.

Don't Smother Your Potatoes

My potatoes had a bit of a rocky start. Apparently I covered them with too much mulch and the shoots had a hard time poking through the thick layer of hay. Once I realized my mistake and removed a bit of the bulk, the green plants happily popped up and grew wildly. *(Thankfully, potatoes are very forgiving, even after you try to smother them...)*

In the past I've planted potatoes the traditional way: digging a deep trench, laying the seed potatoes in the trench, and then mounding more and more dirt as the potatoes sprouted. However, I decided to be a bit rebellious this year... I laid the seed potatoes on the dirt, but rather than mounding them up, I simply covered them with hay. I was holding my breath when I harvested them last month, half-expecting to be completely potato-less. But the mulch came through for me again! I ended up with heaping boxes of gorgeous Yukon gold potatoes from just three rows. And the best part? I didn't have to mess with mounding them this summer, and harvest was super easy-- just pull back the hay and grab the spuds.

Be Generous with the Width of Your Rows

In an effort to conserve space in my small garden plot, I was rather stingy with the width of my rows and made them way too narrow. Next year, I will definitely plan for them to be wider. However, this "problem" is easily remedied by checking the rows every day or so and scooting the hay back in place. It wasn't the end of the world, just more of a slight inconvenience.

On the flip side, I've been impressed with how much the mulch has stayed in place, even with our hurricane-force Wyoming winds. Even after fierce thunderstorms, there are usually only a few patches that need readjusted. The rest stays in place nicely.





WHY NOT THE BACK TO EDEN METHOD?

Every time I talk about gardening on my blog, I get half a dozen folks sending me links to the [Back to Eden garden method](#).

I've watched the video several times, and am completely enthralled by the concept. I was actually going to use that method this year, but after further research, decided to use hay mulch instead.

[A post by my friend Quinn at Reformation Acres](#) is what initially caused me to rethink my Back to Eden plans. I think she has very valid points, and since our gardening season is so delicate, I decided I needed to do more investigation before dumping a huge load of wood chips on my garden.

(Honestly, the thought of having to remove all the chips if the plan didn't work made me totally chicken out...)

Will I try the Back to Eden method later on? Maybe! I love the concept, and I still want to try a test-plot somewhere in my yard. But I figured hay-mulching method was slightly less risky to begin with, and I've had such fantastic results, I haven't felt the need to go buy woodchips (they are tough to find in our area!)



CONCLUSION

I've fallen in love with gardening all over again. Deep mulch gardening is the best thing that's ever happened to my garden.

Period.

I will NEVER go back to bare dirt gardening.
Never, ever, ever.

Deep mulch has allowed me to enjoy the incredible satisfaction that comes from growing your own food, and I didn't have to allow my garden to take over my life in the process.

If you've been struggling with your garden, or are curious about the concept of mulch, I encourage you to jump in! What do you have to lose?

The most important thing you can do when you start mulch gardening? **Relax.**

Don't sweat the details and remember there are very, very few black-and-white rules when it comes to gardening. Research, experiment, and be adventurous. I think the results just might surprise you.

NOW GO FORTH AND MULCH!



MY FAVORITE GARDENING RESOURCES

- [The Ruth Stout No-Work Garden Book](#)
- [Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds](#) -- this is where I purchase all of my non-GMO, heirloom seeds
- [Permies.com](#) – more permaculture gardening info than you can shake a stick at
- [Ruth Stout's System](#) – an nifty article on motherearthnews.com
- [Ruth Stout's Garden](#) – a sweet vintage video on YouTube



ABOUT JILL

I'm Jill Winger. I didn't grow up on a ranch, farm, or homestead, but I've always had a deep rooted passion for the rural way of life.

I reside on a sixty-seven acre chunk of Wyoming prairie that I share with my husband, two children, and an ever-expanding menagerie that includes horses, cattle, goats, pigs, dogs, chickens, turkeys, and geese.

I'm not the perfect homesteader—my barn gets messy, my yard is far from manicured, and my cow sticks her foot in my milk bucket sometimes, but I still love inspiring others to start homesteading journeys of their own.

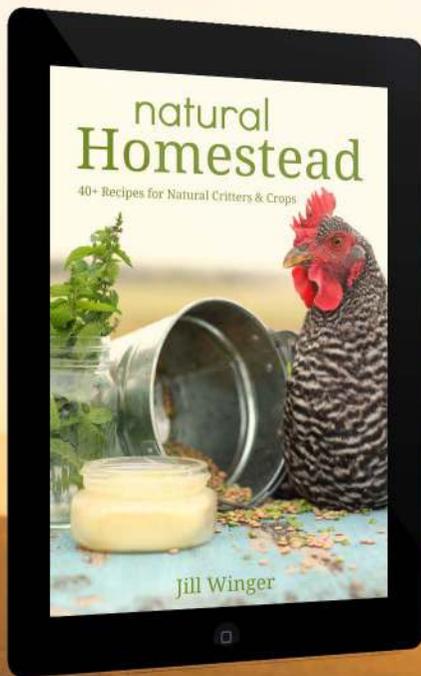
I've been writing on my blog, [The Prairie Homestead](#), for three years. It's there I share recipes for down-home cooking, random observations from my chaotic life, tips for running a homestead, inspiration for those who long to homestead themselves, and stories about the snakes in my house. (Yes, really.)



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