

Version:1.0 StartHTML:0000000181 EndHTML:0000002655 StartFragment:0000002362  
EndFragment:0000002619  
SourceURL:file:///localhost/Users/computer/Desktop/obits/BearfootFarmer.doc

By July, we try to hang up the hoes and make much use of mulch. The benefits of mulching are similar to hoeing; it controls weeds and conserves moisture. But mulch has the added asset of bringing carbon into the garden.

Version:1.0 StartHTML:0000000181 EndHTML:0000004937 StartFragment:0000002366  
EndFragment:0000004901  
SourceURL:file:///localhost/Users/computer/Desktop/obits/BearfootFarmer.doc

In June, I like to see clean rows of vegetables. The summer crops like warm soil, so we don't mulch right away. Constantly stirring the soil releases nutrients and makes it easier for the roots to penetrate.

Once our crops are established, many won't need any more attention until harvest. Potatoes and sweet corn are laid by, and the winter squash and sweet potatoes will just need a bit of weed pulling. Bats and other spring crops have already made and will be out soon.

So we turn our focus to tomatoes, cucumbers and summer squash. Big rolls of old hay are set at various spots around the garden and a fork starts peeling off the layers. This is a dusty job.

In between the plants and in between the rows, hay is laid down at least a foot thick. Pile it on deeply is the mulching motto. Rain and footsteps will pack it down a whole lot, so mulching is not a time to be stingy.

Farmers have cut hay by mid-summer, and often have some left over from last year, which they sell cheap. Expect to pay enough to cover their expenses in making the hay. Square bales are much easier to deal with, but will be more experience.

Weeds are an issue. I try to avoid Johnson grass, but it finds its way in sometimes. We spot it's corn-like sprouts and pull them immediately. A thick layer of hay won't sprout, but the seeds may stay viable. An advantage we have is that we make our own hay, although I'm not adverse to using my neighbor's old hay.

Underneath the mulch the soil stays moist. The vegetables love this, and prove accordingly. Having hay between the fruits, and soil also prevents rotten spots on the vegetables. And after a few months of hoeing, a mulched garden is a blessing.

But the real blessing is still to come. When we farm without bagged fertilizer, our fertilizer comes from the life in the soil. As the hay slowly decays it becomes incorporated into the organic matter of the soil. With compost and it's myriad of microbes, the old hay increases next year's fertility.

So we mulch to help our soils, besides helping our crops. It's a beautiful sight to see nothing but vegetable plants poking up through the hay. With the mulching done and the hoes hung up, our backs feel better too.