

## Permaculture **inPractice**

# Good news: free press means mulch!

This year's mudslinging season was still in full swing at press time. But now, having finally peaked, the trash talk has likely begun to mellow at least a little. So, be glad. Stop and take deep breaths. However, remember: no matter who becomes president, mega-corporations will continue to dominate our media and usurp political power, because not enough people give a damn.

The good news is that this newsprint makes wonderful mulch and weed barrier. Here's how to use it. First, clip this column for future reference. Next, rip off your *Real Estate Guide's* gorgeous, glossy cover. Then lay thick mats of your newfound resource around your favorite plants or along a pathway. Overlap your newspaper so in the end you have a layer 20–24 sheets thick. Top dress with enough decorative mulch to keep the paper from either blowing away in the wind or decaying due to the harsh rays of our desert sun.

Mulch is any material that you place on the earth's surface which improves the soil's ability to support life. Common decorative mulches include shredded bark, bark chips, gravel, straw, hay, compost, and pecan shells. Pecan shells became all the rage a few years ago, but when folks began to realize that the nutty residue in the shells attracted vermin, pecan shells decreased in popularity accordingly.

During extended periods of drought, mulch will retain moisture, prevent evaporation and create a microclimate for beneficial insects. During strong monsoons, mulch will control soil erosion by lessening the impact of precipitation and by reducing the powerful forces of sheet flow. During cold winters, mulch plays a key role in insulating the root zones of plants near the surface of the earth.

The most common forms of weed barrier are commercial-grade fabric, cardboard and newspaper, although other

recycled household items like brown paper bags, campaign literature, old clothing and rugs have been successfully used.

The best mulching method, which also acts as an excellent weed barrier, is called sheet mulching. It consists of a layer of corrugated cardboard, covered by two to four inches of manure, topped with a four-inch layer of carefully placed straw. The glue in the cardboard attracts worms and deters weeds, the manure provides nitrogen, and the straw provides carbon. The end result is the basics of compost: carbon, nitrogen, and worms. Unlike compost, sheet mulch can easily withstand the harsh effect of the elements such as our scalding sun, relentless wind, deep cold, and heavy rains.

Mulch at any time of year, but remember that fresh manure, which is so valuable as nitrogen, can be too hot for young plants. This means the best time to sheet mulch is now, several months before spring planting



**NATE DOWNEY**

time. Now, soon after an election, that is, is also a great time of year to get out and work the earth. The mud you get to sling is good-natured and nature herself, not some CEO or party hack, provides you with everything you'll ever need.

*Nate Downey is president of Santa Fe Permaculture Inc., an ecologically minded, locally owned landscape-design and-installation company. He can be reached at 505-424-4444 and via [www.santafepermaculture.com](http://www.santafepermaculture.com).*