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Making Beds to Replace Your Lawn

"Earth laughs in flowers" —Ralph Waldo Emerson



One of my purposes in this book is to support you in replacing your lawn with other landscapes that are more environmentally friendly and sustainable. Depending on your eco-design, you might plant some combination of flowers, vegetables, shrubs and trees. It can be easier than you think to remove a lawn and replace it. Here are some methods.

COVER-OVER METHOD

Cover-over is the easiest method and the friendliest to the environment because it leaves your existing soil ecosystem intact. This method is also known as "smothering" your lawn. Except for the mulch delivery (which you would probably get anyway) it requires little or no machinery.

The cover-over method simply involves covering your lawn with newspaper or cardboard, then a thin layer of compost to enrich your soil, then a thick layer of mulch. Later you can plant through the mulch. Newspaper tends to work better than cardboard in



Digging out the sod at the edge of the bed



Placing the sod to make a raised bed



Covering the lawn with overlapping newspaper

drier climates, as cardboard dries out more easily. The newspaper blocks light and the mulch blocks air from the grass so it will die, decompose and become lovely organic matter to nourish your new plants!

Here are the steps:

- 1.** Mark the boundaries of the area you will cover. You can use landscape chalk, string, a hose or extension cord.
- 2.** Dig out about 30 cm (1 ft) of sod at the edges of your bed. This is so the grass won't come up later along the edges. You can place the sod on top of the lawn in the middle of your bed to make a raised bed or you can remove it (see "What to do with the sod" later in this chapter).
- 3.** Cover the lawn with newspaper at least half a newspaper (15 sheets) thick. I like to use a full newspaper of thickness. More newspaper won't hurt and less may mean grass comes through. Overlap the covering layers by at least 15 cm (6 in) so that grass and weeds don't poke through. Wetting the cover can help to hold it down, especially on windy days.



Wetting the newspaper to hold it down



Spreading compost over the newspaper



Spreading wood chip mulch over the bed



Wetting down the bed once complete

4. Spread 3 to 5 cm (1 to 2 in) of compost on top of the newspaper or cardboard. It can help to lay a small section of cover first, then the compost, wetting the cover as you go, especially if it's windy.

5. Spread a 10 cm (4 in) layer of mulch over the compost. Wood chips often work best for mulch as they won't blow away. You could mix leaves and some grass clippings or other organics in with the wood chips if you like.

6. Wet the whole covered-over area thoroughly to soak it through. You should need to do this only once.

The Eco-yards Crew Works This Way:

- One person removes all the glossy flyers and opens the newspapers so they are fully open in a wheelbarrow.
- One or more people spread the newspaper out on the lawn, laying down one full open newspaper and then overlapping it halfway with another full newspaper.
- One person sprays down the laid-down newspaper to keep it wet, keeping the hose turned on and using a spray nozzle that sprays only when squeezed.
- One or more people dump the compost on the newspaper with wheelbarrows.
- One person rakes the compost flat.
- One or more people spread the mulch.

We don't have a crew of 15! Folks do double-duty: for example, the compost raker or newspaper opener can also be the newspaper wetter.

Depending on where you are mulching, you may want to install edges to hold in the mulch. Edging could be something like rock walls, bricks or boards. Note that wood chip mulch pieces do tend to stick together, which may allow you to simply taper the height of the mulch down along the outer boundary, rather than actually build up an edge. In that case, lay down more thickness of the newspaper or cardboard along the edge to really prevent the grass from poking through.

Ideally, you would do this cover-over in the fall, let the microbes do their decomposing of the grass over the winter, and plant in through the mulch in the spring.

If you do want to plant right away, you have a few options:

1. Cover the newspaper with 10 cm (4 in) of composted soil or compost/soil mix rather than with 3 cm of compost. This will be enough to plant small plants above the newspaper or cardboard layer. Plant and then put down your mulch.
2. Dig holes for larger plants before you cover the lawn, making the holes about 7.5 cm (5 in) wider than usual. The wider holes

will help prevent grass from coming up around the plants. Put pots or buckets upside-down in these holes to mark the holes and keep them from filling up with compost. Then spread your newspaper or cardboard cover. Leave a 7.5 cm (5 in) space free of cover around your plants so water can easily get to their roots. Then spread your compost/soil. Plant, filling the holes around the larger plants with compost/soil. Then put down your mulch.

3. You could also dig through the mulch and cover to make planting holes—it's just a bit more work. I either use a really sharp shovel, jumping on it to get through the cover or I pull back the mulch and cut the cover away with a utility knife. Again, leave the 7.5 cm (5 in) area around the larger plants free of cover.



Buckets placed in holes where larger plants will go after spreading soil



Cutting through newspaper cover with a knife to plant