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Landscape Fabric: Friend or Foe?

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Ah yes, summer is upon us! Time for all those outdoor planting projects we have been planning all winter long. Unfortunately, that also includes maintaining all those new and old planting areas. There are many strategies for preventing or reducing weeds, but no matter what a person does, weeding is inevitable. There is no shortage of tools, supplies, or products for controlling weeds. Here I am going to discuss the use of landscape fabric.

Landscape fabric comes in large rolls. It may be made out of various materials including solid plastic (similar to garbage bag material), cloth-like material, paper, or woven plastics like polypropylene. It is unrolled in place and cut to the specific size and shape needed for your garden area. Six-inch metal staples, pounded in with a hammer, will hold down the fabric from blowing in the wind. Holes are cut, poked or even burned into the fabric to give just enough room to place the plants. It can be tricky and time consuming to fit the plant into a small hole in the fabric, but there is no weed growth afterwards if the hole was small enough. Most often, a mulch is placed on top of it to give a tidy, finished appearance.



It seems like a neat idea – block the weeds ability to get light if they are beneath the fabric, and any seeds that fall on top of it cannot get to the soil. It seems perfect. The initial cost of the fabric can be expensive, and the staples are not cheap either, with one placed about every foot around the perimeter. Fabric works at the very beginning, but ultimately will fail and leave the user with a big mess.

What happens is that over time the mulch will break down and decompose, as will any dead leaves and branches. This fine, nutrient rich material is perfect for growing weeds. Now we have weeds growing on top of the fabric that was supposed to prevent them. The gardener is left to somehow pull up the fabric and start over. The problem is that the fabric has started to break down just enough to tear into many pieces. You will find yourself with a perpetual mess of fabric shreds.

I moved recently and the former owners had used landscape fabric in a vegetable garden. I am still finding shreds of fabric in my yard two years after removing it. Also the staples used to hold the fabric to the ground are now rusty and blend right in with the soil. They present a hazard for people, pets, machinery, and lawn tractor tires. You will be finding those for years to come as well.

There are a few exceptions where I believe landscape fabric is a valuable tool if the proper precautions are taken. I like to use a fabric with no mulch covering for growing peppers in my vegetable garden. Peppers are very slow growing, like warm soil, and suffer greatly from weed competition. One year I took a vacation after planting three flats of peppers. I weeded thoroughly and eight days later returned to find three-foot high weeds that had choked out all but two plants. Since then, I use a fabric and have wonderful pepper plants without the threat of weeds.

The other situations in which I find fabrics useful are for areas of high foot traffic where weeding is impractical like at a nursery or between garden plots. Fabric is useful under stone as well, but those areas need to be diligently cleaned each fall to prevent leaves from decaying and forming a great seed germination area.

Not all fabrics are the same, however. Solid plastics do not let water in or allow gases to exchange. Fabrics can raise soil temperatures greatly, and even the woven fabrics do not let water through as easily as uncovered soil. If the soil gets too hot or dry, it could negatively affect the beneficial microbes and invertebrates that help our plants grow.

For peppers or similar plants, I would suggest the woven polypropylene type. These offer water and fertilizer permeability and better gas exchange. They have lines that help for spacing and uniform planting. Remove them at the end of every season and save for the following year if they are in good shape.

An alternative is to use paper fabric, which should degrade at the end of the season and fertilize your soil, but this is more costly. In the past I have used newspaper under mulch in perennial gardens. By the time it degrades, it either needed to be redone or the plants were so large there was not much room for weeds anyway.

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