

Preparing Garden Beds

This month I hope that you will enjoy a walk through the garden gate with me as I answer a question that I am asked nearly every day – How do you prepare your garden beds?

Let's assume that I have decided where I want my bed and have an idea of how it fits into our garden plan. Or I might be developing an already established garden. Either way, I need to think about improving soil structure, feeding the soil and thus the plants, suppressing unwanted weeds and meeting water needs. Although preparing some time ahead is best, I am rarely patient or well-planned enough to do that and use a method that works just as well for me.

I don't remove weeds or grass other than persistent ones like couch grass. Clay areas can be given a sprinkle of gypsum. For beds where I will be planting exotics I toss on some manure such as horse, sheep or chook which are readily available to me. I think it is a good idea to use whatever you can get locally or from your own animals so that you save on transport and packaging resources. I don't add anything to areas where I will plant natives. For a bed with both exotics and natives, I go easy with the manure or sometimes just add it at planting time on the surface around the exotics. You could add compost or stack on any organic matter such as fine prunings or autumn leaves at this point, particularly if you wanted to raise the bed. The idea is to enrich the soil and let the worms do the work.

Next I put on six to eight layers of soaked newspaper, overlapping so that the weeds die and rot under it, improving and feeding the soil. On top of that I put on mulch of some kind to hold the paper down but not so thickly as to prevent rain getting through and ground covers from putting down roots as they spread. I use wood chip mulch in my general gardens and straw in any areas with food crops in them. It is much quicker to do all this before any planting.

It helps to place plants with like water needs together. Aim to do as little watering as possible or none at all. If there is any chance that the bed might need to be watered, I put on dripper hoses because they use less water than sprinklers with the water going to the root zone and not being evaporated off. You could do it before or after planting but don't leave it too long because it is a bit of a nightmare to do once the plants have grown a lot.

At last – planting - the best part. You pull back the mulch and paper where you want to put a plant, weed there, dig a hole and pop in the plant. Water the plant in and put the paper and mulch back leaving a couple of centimetres free of it around the stems. I give most plants some individual water in dry spells until they have got underway and are a bit established.

I place my plants according to their mature size. I like a garden to be covered within a couple of years, before the mulch has broken down, since I don't like weeding. To do that, I put in sacrificial plants which I intend to take out. They might be ground covers or smaller shrubs which have their day and then quietly disappear under the main plants, are moved or pulled out or, sometimes, are so gorgeous that they become the central focus after all.

Happy gardening.

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