

Recycling Newspaper for Mulching Strawberries



Newspaper as winter mulch over strawberry beds.

The West Virginia University Extension Service has done research on using newspaper as a mulch in strawberry production. Newspaper was found to be an outstanding source of paper. Slick pages (advertisements) found in newspapers are not recommended, however, since some of the inks in them may contain heavy metals. Most inks now used in newspapers have organic soybean or mineral oil as a base.

Types of Newspaper to Use as a Mulch

Newspaper is available shredded or chopped. The chopped form can be produced on the farm with specialized equipment that may also apply the newspaper to the strawberry bed. Chopped newspaper has been found to have a tendency to move “off-target” until the paper absorbs moisture. Movement “off-target” was minimal for shredded newspaper, which is the best alternative to straw.

When to Apply the Mulch

In strawberry production, newspaper is used primarily as a winter mulch instead of the traditional straw to protect the plants from cold temperatures. It should be applied in late November around Thanksgiving. When it is raked into the row middles in the early spring, the newspaper mulch will reduce the need for weed control.

Weed Removal

Mulch is effective when it blocks the sun’s rays from weeds and weed seeds. If all weeds are removed, the mulch will control most seed germination. During the course of the summer, pull any weeds growing through the newspaper mulch. (The commercial grower should anticipate the use of a selective herbicide.)

Amount of Mulch to Apply

Applying 4 or 5 inches of mulch can provide effective protection against winter injury of strawberries. This requires approximately 500 pounds of shredded paper or approximately 600 pounds of chopped paper per 1,000 square feet of area. Do not worry about applying too much. Check the mulch often and replace the newspaper in areas where its depth is too shallow. Sometimes the wind causes the newspaper to move until the paper stabilizes as a mulch.

Sources of Newspaper Mulch

Various size small engine- or tractor PTO-driven chopper/mulchers are available. Also, some shredders and machines that shred or chop garden refuse may be used to shred newspapers. Save the shredded paper in plastic bags to keep it dry. Chopped newspaper is available in small bales in Grant, Preston, and Randolph counties. It is available in large bales in Greenbrier County. Additional sources of shredded or chopped newspaper should become available soon. Office paper is not suitable for mulch. For more information, contact your local Solid Waste Authority or recycling centers having the capacity to chop or shred and package old newspaper.

Future Seasons

Do not disturb the mulch. This will improve weed control until renovation. Incorporating newspaper and foliage into the soil will improve the soil's organic matter content and will accelerate the newspaper's breakdown.

Fall Fertilization

Strawberry plants begin to set fruit buds for the next year's crop around the first of August. The demand for nitrogen is great at this time. An application of 50 pounds of actual nitrogen per acre is recommended (slightly more than 1 pound per 1,000 square feet). The nitrogen also may improve the rate of decomposition of the newspaper. Apply the nitrogen over the row when the leaves are dry. To prevent leaf burn, brush any granules falling on the leaves onto the ground.

Advantages of Using Newspaper Mulch

- Controls weeds
- Is environmentally sound
- Retains moisture
- Utilizes a recyclable material
- Provides yields comparable to straw
- Adds organic matter
- Fruit stays clean
- Is biodegradable
- Improves fruit's color and shape
- Eliminates volunteer small grains

Disease Control

Research results indicate strawberries will have fewer disease problems when a mulch is used. The splashing effect of rain, which may carry bacteria and fungi onto the plants, is eliminated. However, you must take steps to control diseases when conditions for infection are present. Use only approved fungi-

cides on a strict schedule at the recommended rate. Read the label and apply according to current label directions.

Insect Control

Check your strawberries regularly for insect problems. Use approved insecticides only when the insects are present in large enough numbers to cause problems. Read the label and apply only at the recommended rate according to current label directions.

Recycling

Extension encourages recycling old newspaper and other materials for alternative uses rather than dumping them in landfills.

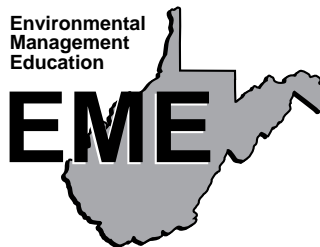


Newspaper as summer mulch between strawberry beds.

Extension Paper Mulch Study Group

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