

What is “lasagna gardening”? (published 2026-08-15)

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Do you have an area of your yard that you’d like to convert into a vegetable garden? Or maybe you want to turn some of your lawn into a native plant meadow, but the task seems way too daunting. Perhaps you should consider trying sheet composting, sometimes referred to as lasagna gardening.

Sheet composting is a technique for preparing new garden plots using nature’s own processes. Basically “composting in place”, it involves smothering the site of the new bed with degradable material, adding layers of compostable materials, and letting time and nature do the hard work. Lasagna gardening is beneficial for converting lawn or waste areas into fertile gardening beds without laborious digging, tilling, or using herbicides or other toxic applications. It’s particularly useful when limiting exertion is desired and there’s no rush to use the new garden plot. Not only does it avoid heavy work, but it’s more likely to result in rich fertile soil.

How to Create a “Lasagna Garden”

Although early fall is the ideal time to start a lasagna garden for spring planting, it can be done at any time of year. Once the new plot has been identified, the first step is to soak the entire area with water then cover it with a degradable material such as cardboard, several layers of newspaper, or builder’s paper (readily available at most hardware stores). I’ve found it to be a great way to reuse large cardboard boxes (though with a couple of cautions I’ll note later). The purpose of this first layer is to smother existing grass and weeds, so it helps to mow or weed-eat the area just before laying down the paper or cardboard. Once the smothering material is in place it, too, should be thoroughly watered.

Next, alternating layers of compostable materials are added, starting with carbon-rich “brown materials” such as dried leaves. Other brown materials include straw, small twigs and branches, pinecones and bark, torn or shredded cardboard, and old newspapers and other non-glossy uncolored paper. This is followed by a layer of “green materials” such as grass clippings, non-diseased plant trimmings and weeds (without roots or seeds), fruit and vegetable kitchen scraps, and coffee grounds and tea bags. Herbivorous animal manure, if available, is also excellent for green material. Ideally each brown layer should be about twice the thickness of the green layers. Alternate layering continues until the depth of the material is sufficient... ideally at least 12 to 18 inches total. Once the layering is complete the area should be thoroughly watered. Covering it with black plastic can help speed the process but is entirely optional. Other than keeping the “lasagna” moist, the work is mostly done. Once the composted materials are no longer recognizable, typically after 4 to 6 months, the garden should be ready for planting, directly into the newly composted soil.

Tips and Problems

Although, ideally, the new garden should be created by adding all of the layers at one time, it’s possible to do the layering over time. One of the biggest challenge of creating more than a very small bed all at once is obtaining the necessary brown and green materials up front. By spreading the process out over time, the layers can be added as materials become available. However, maintaining the right balance of brown and green materials in the alternating layers is challenging. The resulting soil may be less rich and uniform, but it can be overall satisfactory for the garden.

Avoid compacting the layers too much as aeration of the materials helps them to break down more readily. If using cardboard, be sure to remove any large staples as well as sealing tape and plastic labels. Otherwise, you’ll be finding scraps of those non-degradable materials in your garden beds for years to come. Newsprint or other paper should be non-glossy and uncolored.

As with any other composting, it’s essential to avoid using animal scraps or other kitchen waste that is likely to attract animals. And definitely avoid using any plant materials that are diseased or have viable seeds that are likely to sprout later on.

That's pretty much it. Next time you want to start a new garden plot, plan ahead and try cooking up a bit of lasagna. I think you'll like it!

Resources

“Sheet Mulching and Lasagna Composting with Cardboard,” <https://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/em-9559-sheet-mulching-lasagna-composting-cardboard> “

“Horticulture at Home: Sheet Mulching 101,” <https://mbgna.umich.edu/post/horticulture-home-sheet-mulching-101>

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.