

I despise being cold. Over the past few weeks, outdoor air temperatures have fluctuated from the high-teens during the night to the mid-fifties during the day. I think it is safe to say that shirtsleeve weather has vanished for another season. The colder temperatures have prompted Rita and me to light our fireplace, and at night we have even thrown another blanket on our bed.

As temperatures continue to fall, soon it will be time to throw a blanket of winter mulch on our flowerbeds. Notice, I said soon.

Here is a thought. Does adding an extra blanket to one's bed at night have a similar purpose to that of adding a blanket of winter mulch to one's flowerbed? The answer to that question is not as simple as it may seem. Although both actions create a thermal barrier, adding a blanket to one's bed is meant to keep in the warmth; whereas, adding a blanket of winter mulch is meant to keep the soil cold. Allow me to explain.

During late winter and early spring, Nebraska's erratic weather conditions frequently create a situation referred to as the freeze/thaw cycle. During daytime hours, temperatures rise above freezing, causing the upper layer of the soil to thaw. When night closes in, temperatures plummet, causing that same soil to refreeze. This freeze/thaw action causes the soil to move.

Herbaceous (soft-stemmed) perennial plants frequently have their roots growing in the upper few inches of the soil. During a freeze/thaw cycle, movement within the soil easily affects these roots. The movement of the soil frequently lifts the roots high enough to expose the root crown to the air. When this happens and nighttime freezing temperatures return, the exposed roots freeze resulting in death to the plant. To help prevent this action from happening, winter mulch is frequently used. If you recall, previously, I indicated it is too soon to add this blanket of mulch. When is the right time?



Checking with the University of Nebraska's Crop Watch website, I discovered that area soils have been hovering in the low 40's to the high 30's. Although air temperatures have dipped into the teens during the night, warmer daytime temperatures have kept the soil from freezing. The key to adding a successful blanket of winter mulch is to wait until the soil freezes.

Mulch, no matter when added to the soil's surface, creates a thermal barrier. When added in early summer, mulch keeps the soil cooler and creates a weed barrier: both benefits aid in the plant's success. A blanket of winter mulch obviously does not control weeds, but it does keep the soil cold, thus stabilizing movement in the soil. Eventually, as spring changes to summer, winter-mulched soils will thaw. In fact, it is generally recommended to remove or pull back the mulch in the spring, after the threat of frost is gone, to warm the soil and stimulate new plant growth.

Not always do I add a blanket of winter mulch to my flower borders. However, I strongly encourage mulching when there is a new fall planting of perennials. Fall-planted perennials generally have underdeveloped root systems causing them to be extremely vulnerable to the freeze/thaw cycle.

Interestingly, when Mother Nature adds a blanket of snow that remains on the ground throughout the winter, it serves much like a blanket of mulch. A layer of snow insulates and creates a thermal barrier stabilizing the movement in the soil. Generally, less winterkill occurs to perennials if snow covers the soil throughout the winter months.

The fact remains: I despise being cold, and I despise being cold in the snow even more. Already I long for shirtsleeve weather.