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## Sheboygan Avenue Community Garden May 2021 Newsletter



### Straw - Coming Soon! by Jim Baumann, Garden Coordinator

A number of gardeners asked me about the benefits of using straw as a mulch during the growing season.

Let me start with common reasons for using mulch, including straw, leaves, plastic or others. If you do searches online you will find sites where 5, 9 or even 20 reasons are offered for using mulches. I'll stick to five.

The first three reasons are likely familiar to many gardeners:

- **Minimizing weed growth** -- Fewer weeds growing means fewer weeds to pull. The mulch shades the soil where the weeds grow reducing seed germination.

- **Retaining soil moisture and moderating soil temperatures** -- A mulch reduces evaporation of moisture from the soil and lessens the amount of watering needed. The shade provided reduces high soil temperatures.
- **Soil erosion control** – Mulch reduces the erosive impact of raindrops. A number of our plots are sloped and during the first year of the expanded garden we lost up to two inches of soil from some of the plots. Fortunately, we were able to scrape up much of the eroded soil and haul it back to the sloped plots.

The fourth reason is not as commonly recognized. Mulches are commonly used to prevent fungal spores on the soil from splashing up onto plants, especially tomato plants. Often a denser mulch is recommended around tomatoes.

For these four reasons, many different mulches will do. However, the fifth reason, soil health, adds some support for using organic material as a mulch.

This winter I participated in a virtual workshop on improving soil health where the emphasis was on using compost and mulches to feed good soil bacteria and fungi. Without soil bacteria, plants cannot obtain nutrients from soil and soil fungi are very important in promoting root growth for perennials. Straw mulch has a very good carbon: nitrogen ratio for promoting bacteria growth especially those important for growing vegetables. While straw is okay for growing perennials, alfalfa hay topped the list.

This time of year, straw mulch is relatively easy to obtain. Each plot will be provided a half bale of straw, unless the gardener opted out. Gardeners are not required to use a mulch.

In using the straw, please keep in mind that placing straw too early may hinder soil

warm up. Also, don't place the straw so deeply that it encourages mice and voles to live in your plot. However, I tend to find the most mice and vole nests not in the mulch but in three-to-six-inch sections of a bale, flakes, left to be spread at a later time.



The article below, from a previous newsletter, is good information for planning your spring tomato plantings.

## **The 50-Degree Tomato Rule** **by Pat Soderholm**

There's a simple rule for successfully planting and harvesting tomatoes. It's the 50-degree rule.

In the spring, wait to plant tomatoes until the air temperature consistently reaches 50 degrees. In our area, that's usually around May 27th.

At the end of the season, be sure to harvest your tomatoes before the temperature falls to 50 degrees.

Tomatoes will lose flavor and become mushy if exposed to temperatures 50 degrees or lower for three or more consecutive nights. If the temperature drops

and you need to harvest before your tomatoes are ripe, pull up the entire plant and hang it in your garage or a similar protected area. Even though the roots are no longer in the ground, the plant will put all its energy and nutrients into producing seeds and you will have vine-ripened tomatoes.

If you don't have a place to hang the plant, pick the tomatoes and lay them on a paper-lined tray at room temperature. Make sure the tomatoes are not touching each other, cover them with paper and they will ripen nicely up to and even after Thanksgiving. Always keep the tomatoes at room temperature because the 50-degree rule applies to the refrigerator too!

Most retail tomatoes have been refrigerated which is why your garden tomatoes will taste better than store-bought winter tomatoes and almost as good as your fresh summer tomatoes.



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