Your Gardening Week

with AG’s gardening expert Ruth Hayes

Make a ‘duvet’ for winter

Ruth looks at the various ways and means of using mulch

We are well into autumn now, the season of hearty stews, warming fires and thicker duvets and blankets on the bed.

We should also be thinking about insulating the garden – throwing an overcoat on borders to keep them snug through the coldest months.

It’s time to mulch, to add a layer of well-rotted compost, manure or leafmould that will insulate plant roots, keep weeds at bay and break down through the winter to feed the soil and improve its structure.

Add your mulch in a layer around 3in (7cm) thick to soil that is damp and has been weeded. If soil is dry, wait until after the next substantial rainfall as mulching on dry soil can create drought conditions due to rain being unable to penetrate down and causing plants to suffer.

Mulching is not the same as feeding, and while it does feed the soil it is in such small and gradual amounts that plants won’t return to growth.

Actual fertilisers should not be added because they will stimulate new shoots that will be too weak and tender to survive winter. Once damaged by frosts they will blacken and start to rot, weakening the plant and providing a handy entry point for diseases.

Wet until late winter or early spring to restart feeding your plants, as this is when they will return to life after their winter dormancy and will be hungry for nutrients that will help fuel regeneration through the growing season.

Don’t mulch right up against the trunks of trees. Leave a gap, as wet mulch can soften and weaken the bark and provide an entry point for pests and diseases.

Other options

Recycle or try woolly offsets

- Flattened cardboard boxes are perfect for warming empty soil and blocking weeds. The same applies to old plastic compost bags.
- Wool slug pellets are another useful addition because as well as blocking pests they insulate plant roots and slowly degrade, feeding the soil as they do so.
- Chimney Sheep is a Cumbrian company that uses Herdwick sheep wool and jute offsets to make mulches and mulch mats that fit around plants and trees of all sizes.
- They help keep pests and weeds at bay and slowly rot down to feed and insulate the soil and plants.
- Visit chimneysheep.co.uk or call 01900 269427 for details.

Step by step

Four top tips for mulching plants and soil

1. Homemade compost can be a bit weedy, but a quick hoeing gets rid of the weeds. Leave them to rot down as added mulch.
2. Pile straw around the crowns of less hardy evergreen agapanthus and pelargoniums to insulate through winter.
3. Leave fallen leaves on the soil to break down or for worms to drag them into the soil, enriching it and improving its structure.
4. Well-rotted manure is perfect for mulching. Layer it on thickly to protect roots, suppress weeds and condition the soil.
Ivy isn’t so poisonous after all

Climbing plant can help insulate homes, research proves

AFTER years of ivy being vilified for wrecking walls and destroying mortar, the latest research has revealed that this climbing plant is actually a great weapon in the fight against global warming.

Scientists at the RHS, in collaboration with Reading University have discovered that this maligned climber is the most effective plant cover for cooling buildings and reducing humidity.

The paper, recently published in the Building and Environment Journal, demonstrates the impact of green facades and vegetative cover on the temperature and relative humidity within buildings.

Ivy helped cool buildings in summer

It comes at a time when more people are turning towards ‘vertical gardening’ and looking at ways of growing upwards instead of on the level.

This paper looks at the impact of three plant species: Hedera helix (ivy), Parthenocissus tricuspidata (Virginia creeper) and Pilea pumila (green ivy) on temperature and humidity when grown as a wall cover for buildings.

The evidence showed that the best plant for summer cooling was provided by ivy. It was able to reduce the internal and external wall temperature by 7.2°C (45°F) and 5.7°C (42°F) respectively. Not only did ivy provide the best summer cooling for buildings, it also demonstrated the greatest summer reduction in daily variation of relative humidity (RH).

Dr Tijana Blanuša, RHS principal horticultural scientist said: “Many people cut back on growing their homes or workplaces.

Green walls are increasingly popular

“Under the RHS has been keen to encourage new ways of gardening — and the development of vertical green walls using affordable climbing plants has proved to be a welcome addition. I hope that this research will help people decide which plants they want to grow.”

Dr Blanuša worked alongside Dr Faye Thomas-Smith, Dr Emmanuel A Essah and Paul Hadley of Reading University.

Chips ahoy for green-fingered pupils!

Each year, a Surrey garden centre encourages the next generation of gardeners to grow and cook their own potatoes at school.

But this summer, because of lockdown restrictions, Squires Garden Centre gave the pupils from St Mary’s Infant School in Frensham their own spuds to grow at home.

School secretary Sharon Miller said: “All the children enjoyed growing the potatoes, and eating them! Let’s hope that next year we can take part again, and have a harvest over at Squires’ Garden Centres.”

Squires chairwoman Sarah Squire added: “Well done to these students for nurturing their crops so well — a brilliant lockdown achievement!”

New from Suttons

A wide range of new seeds for sale

AFTER a bumper year, which included lockdown sales increasing tenfold, Suttons have released their new wide-ranging seed catalogue for the year ahead.

With a mouth-watering mix of edible and ornamental varieties the historic company, which gained a Royal warrant after delivering to Queen Victoria in 1858, hopes gardens will be thrived with the new arrivals. These include:

Sweet Pea ‘Supersonic’: This Suttons exclusive has a compact style, delectable fragrance and flower stems up to 86cm (40cm) long, making it ideal for cutting.

Viola ‘Freckles’: An unusual viola with china-blue, speckled white flowers. It’s easy to grow and ideal for partly shaded areas of the garden; happy in pots and borders.

Poppy ‘Amazing Grey Experience’: A beautiful annual that self-seeds easily and comes in shades of silvery grey to slate blue.

Urban Forager Mix: Go foraging in your garden with this tasty leaf mix of salad burnet, garlic mustard and sheep’s sorrel that’s ideal for borders, windowboxes, containers and growbags.

Luffa: Eat them like courgettes or use them to scrub your dishes! These are great fun to grow.

The Suttons Seed Catalogue 2021 will be available from the beginning of October and all new varieties can be found at www.suttons.co.uk, or call 0344 326 2200.