

# GARDEN NEWS THE MULCH REVOLUTION

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**T**he Victorians appreciated the value of introducing organic matter such as well composted horse manure to their cultivated soils to maintain its health, structure and fertility. Despite their famed ingenuity, somehow they lacked the foresight that horse and cart would one day be replaced by 8-wheel lorries travelling up and down Bazalgette's Embankment to deliver those vital essentials through our historic garden gates. Recent changes to our local road layout have further added to the challenge of these bulk deliveries and to some extent exacerbated my illogical continental European anxiety of isolated island life, where the Temple seems to be an island within an island. Such challenges are perhaps the natural fate of an historic estate being situated in a fastmoving urban metropolis and so we must try to adapt by being creative in modifying our horticultural principles and reviewing the resources within our gates.

It is common horticultural practice to collect your autumn leaves, shred and compost them down to leaf mould in an uncultivated part of your garden. Annually, we produce two tonnes of this horticultural 'gold dust' (which doesn't seem like much if you think that we have over 65 trees in the Garden). Unfortunately, the leaves of our plane trees cannot be utilised for this rapid turn-around process. Plane tree leaves are equipped with thick waxy cuticles, an adaptation to reduce the rate of transpiration and water loss in its native Mediterranean climates. These water-repellent cuticles prevent the absorption of water, which is crucial for the decomposition process and resultantly a plane tree leaf can take up to three years to break down. I was starting to feel increasingly uneasy about shipping all this seemingly unusable organic material off-site every autumn, until we identified a narrow strip of undisturbed ground behind our long Embankment yew hedging as a site for slow decomposition, whilst also doubling up



as a mulch. Obviously, this site isn't the most practical location for leaf composting as we needed to fine tune our off-road tractor driving skills and basket dumping technique to avoid an avalanche of shredded leaves taking out the speed-walking commuters on the pedestrian path below. Although this doesn't get full marks on the aesthetic front, it still fulfils the functionally of other mulches: suppressing weeds, minimising water loss from the soil and improving soil structure.

This winter we took it a step further and shredded the plane tree leaves harvested from amongst the turf lilies, under the London Plane tree avenue, into a very fine mulch that we re-introduced back to the same site. Time will tell if this experiment is successful and if this method could potentially save us buying 30 tonnes of well composted mulch every other year.

When we were cutting down and shredding the Japanese mountain grass under the Manchurian Walnut and using it as light mulch in the same area, the penny finally dropped that I was practising a method that my apprentice-self had been in awe of. I had heard all this before. Mr Masanobu Fukuoka was a Japanese farmer and philosopher celebrated for his natural farming methods, promoting no-till, no-weed,

no-herbicide grain cultivation worldwide in the 1970s. I read his book *'One Straw Revolution'* in the days when I was a horticultural apprentice back in Germany and I remembered being very intrigued by his alternative approach to soil cultivation. We were taught what seems to be the opposite of his approach and I always wondered if I would ever be able to try and test some of his ideas in my more traditional horticultural career.

And see here, unconsciously in the last couple of years we have been practising some of Mr Fukuoka's techniques. Maintaining the balance of both his 'natural' approach and the more 'clinically tidy' tradition of gardening helps us create a healthy and aesthetically pleasing space whilst striving to be more self-sustainable. Consequently, this reduces the number of mulch lorries that we need to squeeze through our gates and counterbalances my illogical continental European anxiety of isolated island living. I am currently revisiting Mr Fukuoka's book with my colleagues and volunteer in our horticultural book club.

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