



Soil naturally accumulates between the rocks on top of fabric so dandelions and other annual weeds will have a nice place to germinate.

The Trouble With Landscape Fabric

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People have been doing some form of gardening for as long as we've been on this planet and weeds have always been a part of the equation. Gardening techniques have not changed much over time. Till the land, plant the seeds and nurture them until they become established. It all sounds so simple.

For avid gardeners removing the weeds before they take over and maintaining a regular program to keep them under control is a rewarding experience.

For non-gardeners, however, having to weed the garden is an unpleasant chore often avoided. When it's finally tackled, the perennial weeds are often very well established and, in the case of annuals, the seeds are everywhere.

As the old saying goes, "One year seeding is seven years weeding," owing to the fact that seeds collect in the soil and stay in what is called a seed bank. They then intermittently germinate over time.

The gardener who devotes a little time each week to weeding can expect the chore to eventually ease up.

But if a garden is left unattended for a long period of time, the chore becomes more and more challenging.

It's no surprise that a lot of time has been spent over the years thinking about an easy way to keep weeds at bay. The most recognized method is to use what is referred to as a weed barrier or landscape fabric.

The principle behind weed barriers is to cover up, stifle, suppress or otherwise stop weeds from raising their ugly heads in the garden.

It all started back in the 1960s when a material called black polyethylene was invented. Innovative landscapers – myself included – discovered weeds were suppressed when covered with this light- and air-inhibiting material. The material was not pleasant to look at, however, so it be-



There is fabric under this decorative rock and the weeds still come through.

came common practice to cover it with bark mulch, river rock or the ever-popular material of the 1970s – lava rock. Plants were placed in the ground through holes cut into the plastic either before or after the barrier material was laid down. A markedly diminished performance in plant health and vigour led to the discovery that plants did not appreciate having their root zones separated from both air and moisture.



The woven fabric here is a good choice.



Here is an example of inexpensive fabric that will not do too much as a weed barrier and will tear quite easily.

Again, the inventive spirit prevailed and a fabric that allowed the plants to breathe and water to penetrate the root zone was developed. Now there are as many variations of landscape fabric as there are tomato varieties on the seed racks. Some are so thin and flimsy that any seedling could penetrate them with ease and

the sharp pointed couch grass root wouldn't even know it was there.

With landscape fabric you generally get what you pay for and the higher end products are woven. Look closely and you will see the strands of fibre woven just like linen.

But here's the point: Do landscape fabrics, even the high-end ones, do the job of preventing weeds from taking over your garden?

To a degree they do. However, landscape fabric is not the panacea it is made out to be as many gardeners are finding out.

The better fabrics will, in fact, keep deep-rooted perennial weeds at bay for awhile until they find their way through the planting holes or around the edges. If the weeds aren't pulled or cut to the ground they will soon establish themselves in amongst the plants and eventually infiltrate the mulch on the surface.



Wherever debris or soil accumulates, weeds will germinate above the fabric as shown here with this snapweed.

The weed barrier effect does not help with weed seeds that germinate in the mulch or rock that covers it.

One of the worst problems occurs when weeds grow between rocks sitting on fabric.

The weeds are pretty difficult to hoe when they're growing between rock and picking and pulling the weeds by hand is a real pain.

Landscape fabric allows a short spell of no-maintenance to pass by. But after awhile the whole thing turns into a big mess of fabric, rocks and weeds.

Is there a purpose for landscape fabric? You bet there is! The main purpose for this fabric is to keep decorative rock from disappearing into the soil as it might do in dry riverbeds or in Japanese pebble or sand gardens. It is also used to cover areas in nurser-



This fabric provides a nice clean area for displaying potted nursery stock.

ies and garden centres where containers of plants are displayed and for covering perforated drainpipe to keep sediment from plugging it up while allowing the water to flow through freely.

Don't take the term "weed barrier" too seriously, as did a landscaper who put landscape fabric down and then layered 4" (10cm) of soil over top of it. All of the plant roots were attracted to the soil above the fabric because it

had the most oxygen available. But when the surface of the soil dried out the plants subsequently died or went into decline.

You may be tempted to try all sorts of innovative new ways to control weeds. But then again, you might be wise to just return to cultivating the soil between the plants with your favourite tool. If you haven't got a favourite, there are some really great new tools waiting to be discovered.®



This eight-year-old bed of junipers has been covered with fabric and then topped with a couple of inches of soil. This was not a good idea because the roots of the plants along with the weeds have found a home in the soil above the fabric. There is not enough soil above the fabric to sustain the plants in dry weather.