Preparing for Landscaping the Labyrinth at St. Mark's by Moving Gravel, Preparing the Water Tank Area and Sheet Mulching with Cardboard and Wood Chips

One-page guide based on university Extension sources (Oregon State University Extension EM 9559, revised July 2025; Washington State University Extension, Puyallup)

Overview

The area around the labyrinth has mainly been cleared of invasive weeds. Much of it is still covered with compacted gravel, which needs to be dug and moved to the area behind the garage as a base for placing water tanks. We will do the digging and leveling mainly with a excavator on Oct. 16. After the ground is cleared of gravel, we need to sheet mulch it in preparation for planting it out. The sheet mulching will be on Oct. 31.

What is Sheet Mulching?

Sheet mulching smothers weeds and grass by blocking light with a layer of cardboard, then covering it with wood chips or other mulch to hold it down. It is a no-dig way to start or expand a bed, reclaim a weedy path, or convert lawn. Fall is a good time to start in the PNW: the layers break down over the wet winter, and the area is ready by spring. We are sheet mulching around the labyrinth to create planting areas. Once the sheet mulching is complete, the Pierce Conservation District will assist in developing a planting plan.

Future Plans

We will use primarily native, pollinator-friendly, and drought resistant plants. We hope to mainly water the area with water harvested from the roof of the garage and stored in water tanks in back of the garage.

Materials

- Plain brown corrugated cardboard (no glossy or printed sheets), with tape and staples removed
- Arborist wood chips or shredded bark
- Tools needed: an excavator, box cutters, shovels, rakes, pick-axes, wheelbarrows and strong backs
- Hose, spading fork, mower or string trimmer, and rocks or stakes to anchor sheets in wind

Step by step

1. **Dig out persistent weeds** such as blackberry, bindweed, morning glory and quack grass. Cardboard may not smother them. This has mainly been done already.
2. **Dig and remove the gravel** mainly with the excavator. Level the ground and move the gravel to the area behind the garage.
3. **Loosen the soil** with the excavator, a spading fork or a broad fork to help drainage.
4. **Lay the cardboard,** overlapping every edge by at least 8 inches so no gaps let light through. OSU suggests several layers of paper or cardboard but advises against making it too thick, since thick layers decompose slowly.
5. **Soak it thoroughly** with water. This helps it break down and lets water reach the soil below.
6. **Top with wood chips,** several inches deep, to hold the cardboard down and finish the surface. We will use shovels, rakes, wheelbarrows, and pitchforks. OSU describes layers of roughly 1 to 6 inches. We have piled up enough to put at least that much as needed.
7. **Plant:** In the spring, we will clear the wood chips and cut holes through the cardboard, if needed, to open spaces for planting. We will mainly follow the plan developed by the Pierce Conservation District.
8. **Water** with water harvested from the roof and stored in the water tanks installed, hopefully, with a grant received from the PCD.
9. **Maintain:** top up chips as they decompose and keep the mulch moist, since dry cardboard sheds water.