

Mulch for a Healthy Garden



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A learning resource to improve food gardening through the use of mulch for schools and communities in Port St Johns

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Introduction

This booklet about food gardening has been compiled for the schools and community of Port St Johns and other schools and communities that have similar weather condition of long dry seasons. It focuses on the knowledge and experience of Super Nofemele, an experienced gardener at a Roman Catholic school in Port St Johns in the Eastern Cape. It will be especially helpful for schools and communities that experience long dry seasons similar to the conditions in Port St Johns. For those already gardening under similar conditions the booklet may offer a new view and also strengthen what they already know and practise in conserving water.

Most of the information included in the booklet comes from Super Nofemele's knowledge and understanding of the garden at the school where he has worked at the school for two years now.



Super Nofemele (above) is a quiet tall friendly man at his mid 50's, originally from Cwele, in Umtata. Now he resides in Port St. John's, in Roman Catholic School premises and has been with the institution since April 2011. He only visits his family once a month and also during school holidays.

After some attempts to meet up with Super, one late winter cloudless and shiny morning, just after the normal routine of school assembly before classrooms could commence, I was sitting on a van, a distance from the school and watching every move happening at the school as I slowly gathered my tools, and trying to figure out if I could identify this man whom I do not know.

As soon as the assembly was dismissed, I jumped off the van and slowly walked towards the staffroom to ask access and permission to interview Super – the man I had heard so much about. Finally Super was at school premises and I was taken to him by Ms Ndamase – a teacher who coordinates and facilitates the garden at the school. Before I could lay my eyes on him, Ms Ndamase saw Super from a distance and told him that he had a visitor.

We were introduced to each other by Ms Ndamase and she left. As we were talking about the beautiful and unusual morning during those days and also some difficulties of getting hold of him from the previous days I was there. I noticed that he was a quiet man, but I was not sure if he was quiet because he had no idea of why I wanted to interview him, or just that he wanted to be sure what exactly I had to say to him.

Food Gardening

Food gardening at the Roman Catholic School has been practised over a long period from the time when Agriculture was still a learning area (subject) at the school. Even after the education system changed, the Port St Johns School did not abandon the practice. Gardening is now used as an additional 'outside classroom' lesson where pupils are given tasks to propagate plants and any related garden activities.

Food gardening can be practised for a number of reasons. Some people do it so they can sell vegetables or fruit to make a living, others so they have fresh vegetables for their own families, while others so they can beautify their garden with a variety of plant species, these could be ornamental, herbs or vegetables. Super said the Port St Johns school maintains a food garden primarily to grow food, but also to generate revenue for the school: "The school utilises the garden to produce food for the pupils and also to sell and make if we harvested more than enough food."



School teachers at their healthy intercropped garden

To garden successfully, Super explained, you need to look after the soil and keep it moist. “In order for one to have a successful healthy garden one must have good soil and moisten the soil often; in order to have a moist soil one is not always obliged to use water, but one could also use mulching – that would also lead to a successful healthy garden. He further went on to say “Having a moist garden is important as the vegetables thrive better and produce healthy food.” People still use a lot of water because they assume that plants also use water more-the-same as humans and follow the saying ‘water is for living’.

When I asked him to clarify, he simply said “Jong’ apha”, [listen], plants do not really need water to survive but only

moist soil and with that you could use mulch to preserve water.” Therefore having mulch could assist and support the successful growth of plants. There are other techniques to conserve water such as mulching, growing groundcovers, trees and etc.

What is mulch?

A pupil applying mulch at the school garden.

Mulch is any material that can be applied on the surface of the



soil around the desired plants in order to keep moisture in the soil. Mulch is also an effective way to control garden weeds. In order for the mulch to protect against garden weeds it must be properly applied. Mulch is applied in a way that the thickness of the layer should be able to keep soil moist and

weeds controllable for a reasonably long period. But at the same time the mulch should not be applied around the stem of the desired plant as this would cause the stem to rot.

There are two types mulch, namely organic and inorganic mulch. Organic mulch comes from the animal products and plants material such as compost, chopped bark, chipping and grass cuttings. Organic mulch breaks down to enrich the soil. As the mulch breaks down one needs to consistently apply another layer of preferred mulch so as to continue to keep soil moist and suppressing the seeds. In the Port St Johns school they apply grass cuttings. Inorganic mulch is mulch that does not break down the soil, such as stones, gravel and pebbles.

Why people use mulch?

There are many benefits from using mulch. People use mulch to enrich the soil, to prevent the erosion, and to keep the soil moist. Mulch strengthens the roots of plants by holding moisture around the root system. People are becoming aware of the importance of water and the role that this resource plays, and the scarcity of water that other people experience. Super has also said that mulch prevents or delays the growth of weeds. Super also mentions that he uses mulch to keep out chickens and other domestic animals.

How people use mulch?

School facilitator, showing pupils how to apply mulch.



Super said that if you use grass as mulch, you need to lay down a thick layer of grass. He explained: “We do that to avoid the grass from being blown away easily, as our garden is in an open area.”

According to Super “We normally use the grass for our garden because after it has done its major role – mulching – it will decompose and later it will improve and enrich the soil we have”.

Other people use mulch for other reasons and with different materials such as stones, pebbles and plastics – these materials are not environmentally friendly. When people use such materials they do it for different reasons, it could be for decorating, or for totally suppressing the weeds, or it could be to create walking paths.

Benefits of mulch

Mulch preserves water in the soil and results in less water being lost. Super explained that “by applying mulch helps the desired plant to grow successfully as mulch retards the growth of weeds because they tends to competes with desired crop in the garden for water. Mulch also improves the drainage of the soil and encourages the plant roots to develop deeper root system.

Super says mulch can also shade roots from the sunlight and protect them from wind. Mulch plays an important role in temperature control wind. It cools the soil during the day. It holds the warmth in the soil at night thus protecting plants against frost damage”.

Super said “the application of mulch in the garden also reduces the soil compaction, especially when they had activities in the garden as they walk all over and in numbers. Mulching therefore loosens the soil for harvesting.

Reflection on what I have learned

As I conversed more with Super I realised that my first perception about his personality was incorrect. I found that he was actually a talkative and open person. Maybe in the beginning he was not sure why I wanted to talk with him.

I have learnt that before one could conduct an interview, one should inform the interviewee and explain clearly what one is expecting for, so that the interviewee may be aware and be prepared of the interview. Or maybe one could even give the list of questions one would be asking on the proposed interview day. Super had deep experience of gardening, particularly with mulching.