



THE UNSUNG TARP

Low-tech and underappreciated, tarpaulins are one of the most useful pieces of equipment a gardener can own. *Gordon Hayward*

WORKING IN OUR GARDEN here in southern Vermont over the last 15 years, I have learned that simple, versatile tools are best. And what could be simpler or more versatile than a tarpaulin?

One morning years ago, I pulled into our driveway with a load of shrubs in the back of my pickup truck. As I untied the polyethylene tarp I had used to protect the plants, I was thinking ahead to the mess I was sure to make on the lawn between the borders where the shrubs were to be planted.

I had plastic sheeting in the garden shed, but I knew from experience that I'd tear it with my shovel and end up with soil, roots, and peat scattered everywhere. Then it hit me: I could use the tarpaulin as a sort of garden cloth. It was a generous size, strong, and slippery enough to be dragged along the ground when laden with heavy, damp

soil. I wouldn't easily tear it with the point of my shovel, either.

I spread the tarp to overlap the edge of the garden by a foot or so, and started planting. An hour later the garden cloth was strewn with burlap, twine, soil, stones, weeds, compost, prunings, and plant labels. I shoveled the soil and compost back into the border and pulled the cloth to the compost pile. There I sorted the wood, plastic, and compostable materials. What I left behind in the garden was a lawn just as clean as when I had begun work.

Several days later I was weeding a broad perennial bed in the garden. Rather than use a wheelbarrow to collect the weeds, I spread out an 8 × 10 foot tarp. A wheelbarrow requires good aim, because it is a small, raised target enclosed on three sides, but a large tarp is tough to miss. It also holds

a lot of weeds and is at ground level, so I don't need to twist or raise my body when weeding.

After weeding one section of the border I simply pulled the cloth to the next section and loaded on more weeds. When it held what I could comfortably pull, I lifted each corner of the tarp and gathered the weeds at the center. Then I twisted two of the corners together to give me a firm grip, and hauled the lot to the compost pile. Unlike a wheelbarrow, the tarp made negotiating the steps a snap.

The only problem I've encountered is that in my enthusiasm, I sometimes overload the garden cloth. When a wheelbarrow is too full you see that it's too full, but if you're not paying attention, you'll load a tarp well beyond the point that you can pull it easily along the ground.

You can buy inexpensive polyethylene garden cloths in several colors, sizes, and weights from mail-order catalogs, garden centers, and discount houses. Since cloths from 6 × 8 foot to 12 × 16 foot cost only \$3 to \$10 dollars, I have several different ones for different jobs. I have found the 8 × 10 foot size to be the most versatile, but you'll want to match the tarp size to the job. You can fill a 12 × 16 foot tarp with leaves and haul it easily, but cover such a large tarp with heavier debris, and you won't budge it.

I prefer unlaminated cloth when working on a slope, because weeds and debris stay where they land. Yet slippery, laminated cloths are easier to

pull along a lawn and to unload. Recently I purchased industrial-strength PVC tarps; they're longer lasting than polyethylene, but they definitely weigh more and increase your cost per square yard at least sixfold.

There are tarps of other materials, too, but these create more problems than they solve. Burlap is difficult to pull along the ground and catches on every root or stone in sight; furthermore, burlap gets heavy when wet, mildews, and wears out quickly. Waterproof canvas is much heavier than polyethylene and, like burlap, is susceptible to mildew. Clear plastic tears too easily and is so light it ruffles in even a modest breeze, disrupting the flow of your work.

I've discovered numerous uses around my home for the garden tarp: to ease cleanup when sand, gravel, mulch, or compost is delivered onto a lawn or driveway; to collect and haul away leaves; to carry mulch or compost into tightly planted shrubs or borders; to catch prunings when trimming a hedge, shrub, or tree; to collect debris when dividing and transplanting perennials; to catch wood chips and other debris spat from a chipper; and to cover tools and equipment left outside.

There are clearly many more uses for garden cloths that you will discover. When you begin working with a tarp in the garden, you will probably come to the same conclusion I've reached: simple, versatile tools are indeed the best. ♡

