Sheet-Mulching Basics

Sheet mulching is a wonderful low-cost, low-tech method for controlling weeds. It can be used in planting areas, pathways, and even on top of existing vegetation. It basically consists of a layer of cardboard or newspaper topped with a thick layer of mulch, usually wood chips. This combination effectively smothers most weeds and grasses, and inhibits germination of weed seeds. You can plant directly into sheet-mulching to establish your new drought-tolerant garden.

Tips for effective sheet-mulching:

1. Only use in areas that are flat or gently sloped. Ideally, ground is fairly uniform and smooth.
2. Cut or flatten any existing vegetation, but no need to dig it out. If the area will soon be planted, and it’s in your budget, spread a thin layer of good organic compost over the weeds and water thoroughly to start the decomposition process.
3. Completely cover the ground with flattened cardboard boxes or full sheets of newspaper 8-10 sheets thick.
4. Overlap the sections or pieces by 8-10 inches. Cover all gaps!
5. Extend the edges of the covered area 8-10 inches beyond the weeds.
6. You can use rocks or logs to keep everything in place while you are working, or you can pre-wet the cardboard or newspaper so it will stay in place.
7. Apply a THICK layer of mulch: 4-6 inches. Wood chips from tree trimming companies are great and free, but other materials may be used.
8. To plant into your sheet-mulched area, simply scrape aside the mulch and cut a hole in the cardboard to dig your planting hole. Leave a clear space around the stem of your plants to protect them from damage by chewing bugs.

The sheet mulching can be left in place indefinitely. The cardboard/newspaper and woodchip mulch material will break down over time, so you will need to renew the top layer of mulch as needed to continue to suppress weeds.