

HAY VS. STRAW

You asked, our Garden Guru Delivers.

Sincerely,
The Revelstoke Local Food Initiative



WE ARE TALKING ABOUT USING STRAW OR HAY
IN THE CONTEXT OF GARDEN MULCH



Straw is the stalk of a cereal crop such as oats, barley, wheat, or rye after harvesting has removed the seed heads – a secondary by-product of the cereal crop – it is actually more expensive to buy straw than it is to buy hay, because (a) not much is produced locally and (b) Straw must be seeded annually while hay is a perennial grass crop.



Hay is a short word for grass, grown to proper height, cut at the peak of nutrition (ideally before it goes to seed), dried and bundled. The best hay smells sweet, and if you take a handful and get it wet, it still looks like grass. Hay bales can look like a greenish coarse grass, fine grass, or even flowery and weedy grass. Straw has an almost exclusively yellow colour when it is baled, and barely smells.

It is difficult (due primarily to weather) to cut hay without at least some of the grass going to seed; whereas, farmers make every effort to harvest all valuable seed from the straw stalks prior to baling, resulting in fewer seeds in straw bales.



Now let's talk about your garden. If your goal is simply to cover the soil, as for paths, then straw is fine. If your goal is to enrich your soil, then the nutritious hay is much better. Using good quality of either is important, so learn basic evaluation of bales because both hay or straw may be excellent, good, or poor quality. Lesser quality means more weeds and seeds in *both*.

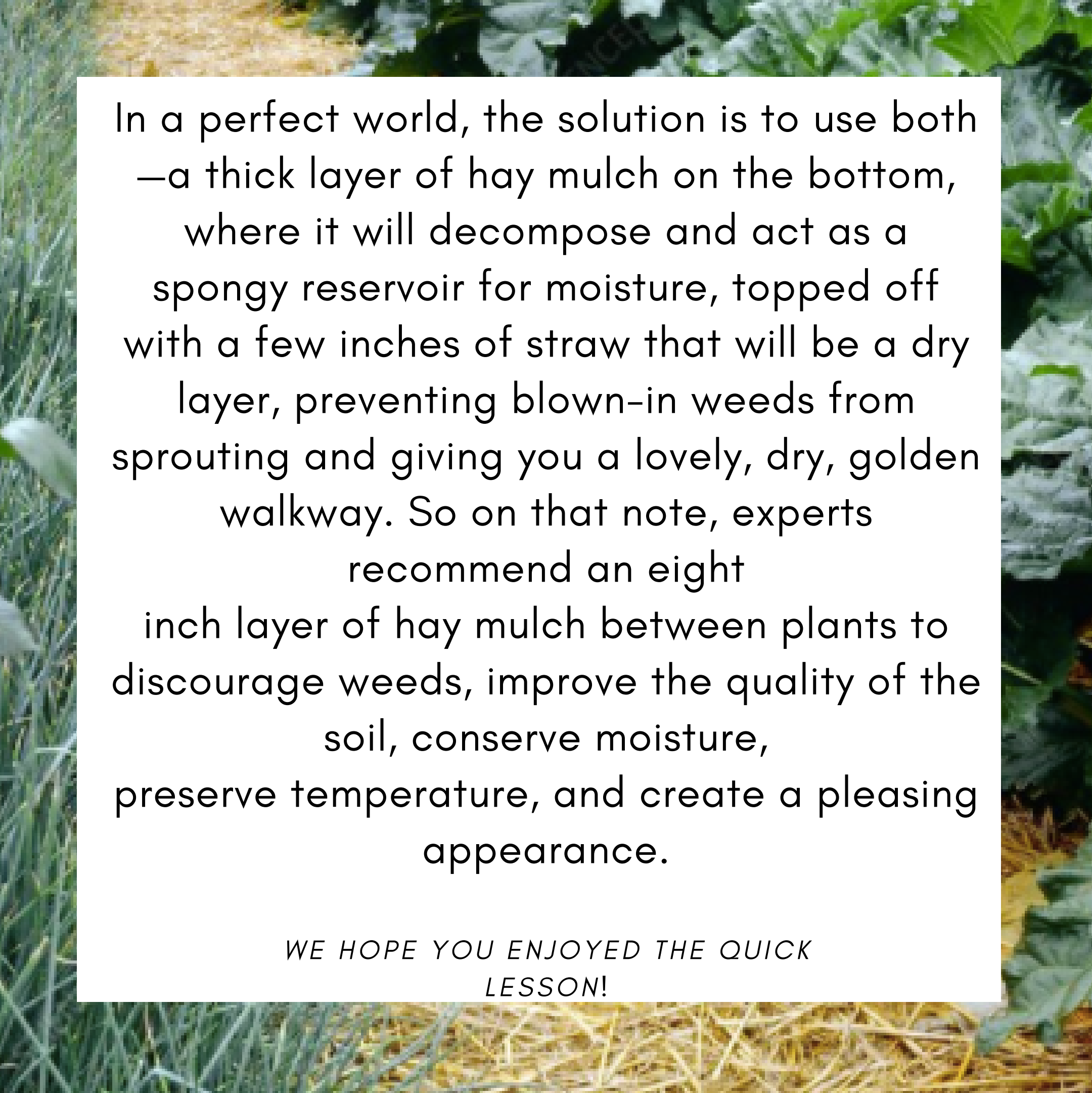


PROS OF STRAW

Straw is a terrific insulator. The hollow stems retain air, making it easier to spread. It tends to remain lighter and fluffier than hay, and it keeps a beautiful golden appearance for quite a long time. Straw is usually a cleaner product from a weed point-of-view for mulching, but straw will not readily breakdown.

PROS OF HAY

Third cuttings of hay contains almost no seeds and is very low in fiber, allowing it to decompose faster. Hay adds significant nutrients to the soil to increase its fertility. It adds a balanced ratio of NPK, as well as all the trace minerals, unlike straw that is just fiber and cellulose. Hay acts as a sponge during heavy rainfalls, it slows down the amount of rain that soaks into the soil to help prevent erosion and leeching of nutrients and finally, because hay packs down densely, the weeds from underneath get smothered and die very quickly.



In a perfect world, the solution is to use both—a thick layer of hay mulch on the bottom, where it will decompose and act as a spongy reservoir for moisture, topped off with a few inches of straw that will be a dry layer, preventing blown-in weeds from sprouting and giving you a lovely, dry, golden walkway. So on that note, experts recommend an eight inch layer of hay mulch between plants to discourage weeds, improve the quality of the soil, conserve moisture, preserve temperature, and create a pleasing appearance.

*WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED THE QUICK
LESSON!*